# Academic Staff Perceptions of the Need for Proofreading for UK Postgraduate Students

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## ABSTRACT

When university students in UK have difficulties with writing, their lecturers encourage them to have someone proofread it. Research on proofreading has focused mostly on how proof-readers should proofread and edit the students' writing. Much less research has been done to ascertain the extent to which lecturers and academic supervisors should encourage their students to proofread their writing professionally or otherwise. This study seeks to explore lecturers' beliefs with regards proofreading and the extent to which they encourage their students to consult professional or non-professional proof-readers for help. Data were gathered from three sources: surveys administered to 42 lecturers, interviews with 8 of the lecturers, and content analysis on lecturers' feedback on students' writing; all of which were analysed in order to find out the extent to which they ask their students to get their work proofread. The analysis of the data indicates that most academic staff did not ask their postgraduate students to get services from professional proof-readers before they submited their work because it was unnecessary and costly. They also argued that students should proofread their work to develop proofreading skills. In contrast, academic staff who usually asked their students to refer to professional proof-readers agreed that the reason behind this was that students' written work often include grammatical and structural errors which made their ideas and arguments unclear, and consequently the student's intended meaning was lost.

*Keywords:* Academic staff, academic writing, perceptions, proofreading

## INTRODUCTION

University students, especially in the UK, tend to submit their writing to proof-readers in order to improve the quality of their work. Proofreading has been defined in various ways, depending on the context. The Institute of Professional Editors Limited (2017) identified proofreading as the final prepress stage of a three-level process, preceded by the copy-editing stage. Similarly, Rebuck (2014) explained that academic supervisors considered proofreading as the "last stage" of a piece of writing that has gone through several drafts. As can be seen, these definitions seem to indicate that proofreading is the final stage of the work that is done by a third-party and which results in changes to the text at the language level. For the purpose of the current study, Harwood et al.'s (2012) definition of proofreading is used: "… third-party interventions that entail some level of written alteration on assessed work in progress".

In a recent study, Alkhatib (2019) found that many postgraduate students in UK universities resorted to their friends or family members to help them proofread their work. Alfehaid (2017) also concluded that doctoral students sought help from proof-readers to help improve the quality of their writing. The fact that universities in UK have different guidelines regarding the appropriateness of consulting proof-readers makes it more confusing for academic staff (i.e. lecturers, supervisors, tutors etc.). While some UK universities, in the writing guidelines do not make any direct reference to the acceptability of consulting professional or other proof-readers, other universities warn their students against this action. The University of Sheffield (2019), for example, stated in its web page:

There are a large number of companies offering paid proofreading services to students. Please be aware that the University of Sheffield does not endorse any of these services and, if you use them, you do so at your own risk. All writing submitted for assessment must be your own work, so any external input into your writing carries with it a risk of plagiarism. Proofreading your own work, on the other hand, is free, carries no risk of plagiarism, and will teach you a new transferrable skill.

Similarly, students in the University of Reading (2019) "are warned that any use of third party proof-reading or editing services must not compromise the authorship of the work submitted". Conversely, other universities (e.g. University of Essex, 2005) encourage such action especially for NNSs, stating, "Students whose first language is not English may want to have Masters level projects and dissertations proofread. There are no University regulations forbidding the use of proof-readers for other types of work."

Likewise, lecturers, supervisors, and language tutors demonstrated different practices. While some of them routinely proofread their students' writing, others are very strict as to the appropriateness of any intervention (Harwood et al., 2009). However, recent research on proofreading focused mostly on proof-reader's perceptions

and practices (Harwood et al., 2009, Harwood, 2018), and how proof-readers help non-native writers in their publications (e.g. Bisaillon, 2007; Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Lillis & Curry, 2006; Mauranen, 1997). Much attention should be directed on how lecturers, language teachers, and/ or academic supervisors deal with those students and their NSs counterparts. The present study, therefore, seeks to explore these issues through the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do academic staff in UK universities ask their students to consult professional or other proof-readers?

RQ2: To what extent are there differences in lecturers' approach towards proofreading when dealing with NS and NNS students?

## Literature Review

Researchers (e.g. Harwood et al., 2012; Smith & Sutton, 1994) discussed the role of proof-readers, indicating that 'proofreading' involved verifying accuracy in the areas of sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, spelling and usage, and capitalization. Harwood et al. (2012) identified three types of proof-readers students resorted to for assistance with their writing text: (1) professional proof-readers, for whom proofreading is a business rather than a hobby; (2) part-time/ temporary freelancer proof-readers, for whom proofreading is short-term (e.g. graduate students who use proofreading jobs to help fund their studies); and (3) non-professional/ volunteer proof-readers (family members, and friends). For the purpose of the present study, the term

professional proof-readers refer to any private third-party intervention (i.e. whether private institutions, agencies, or freelancers). Non-professional proof-readers, on the other hand, refer to volunteers (e.g. family members and friends or colleagues).

Many reasons have been provided in previous research for reasons as to why students turn to proof-readers for assistance. Gardner and Barefoot (2017) pointed out that student writers committed both performance-based and competence-based errors and, therefore, needed to rely on consulting strategies. Harwood (2018) declared that one of the main reasons students seeked assistance from a third party was their inadequate language performance. It is advisable, therefore, that students should understand the "purpose of proofreading" and "at what stage it should occur". Harwood provided three main purposes of proofreading; to improve essay structure and argumentation, to enrich the content of essays, and to rectify errors in the language. From the viewpoint of students, turning to proof-readers for help is necessary because, most often, finding one's own mistakes is difficult. West (1983), Harris (1987), Gardner and Barefoot (2017) highlighted the fact that even experienced writers and editors had trouble detecting errors in text. It was found that students failed to detect their own errors because they "see what they meant to write rather than what they have actually written, i.e. they read their text instead of proofreading it". This implies that not only non-native students but also native students may seek

proofreading assistance. In addition, one obvious reason students (especially those of low-proficiency) justify their action in resorting to proof-readers is that they often find it difficult to address and maintain the core theme of their assigned work and therefore they go off-topic (Gardner & Barefoot, 2017). Harwood (2018) believed that since students needed to get the text "up to an acceptable standard", they conceived it justifiable to have recourse to a third party for help in order to gain a higher grade in their final work, or gain approval from their supervisors.

Academic staff (lecturers, readers, and professors), on the other hand, stated several reasons why a good number of their students were often advised to refer to a third party for proofreading. McNally and Kooyman (2017) explained that one of the reasons was that many students were "ill-prepared" and came from low-level English language backgrounds. It is also proclaimed that mediating proof-readers tend to bridge the "often unrealistic gap between the writing skills of students and expectations of faculty" and provide a "scaffolding" to help novice writers acquire the necessary composition skills (McNally & Kooyman, 2017). Harwood et al. (2009) cautioned that proofreading the work of student writers might require the advisor to "make such significant corrections" the consequence of which would be awarding "a grade that does not accurately reflect the student writer's real discussions".

For many postgraduate students, proofreading has become a mechanically-practiced pre-submission act to the extent that it is now performed without even the least of hesitation on the part of students (McNally & Kooyman, 2017). In their endeavour to put an end to their students' attempts to seek third-party assistance in their written work and encourage them to do proofreading by themselves, many Academic Language & Learning (ALL) institutions have made it clear to their students that proofreading services are not offered by them (McNally & Kooyman, 2017). They explicitly state to their students that they are "unable to provide an editing, proofreading or grammar-checking service". This "no proofreading" mandate has now become part of the rhetoric of ALL support centres and institutions (McNally & Kooyman, 2017). The University of Essex (2005) stated that "there is no obligation for any student to engage the assistance of a paid proof-reader at any stage of study." However, the University also acknowledges that such assistance is recommended by teachers. The University of Oxford (2018) encouraged students to proofread their own work and asserted that "the use of third-party proof-readers is not permitted for work where the word limit is fewer than 10,000 words". Moreover, in certain cases where the purpose of the assessment is to determine students' abilities in linguistic areas such as grammar or syntax, students are not allowed to any proofreading assistance. Similarly, the University of Warwick (2018) announced that "proofreading should initially be undertaken by students themselves, and third-party proof-readers are not expected

to actively amend existing, or create new content in draft work." Universities in UK expect that any submitted piece of writing to be students' own work. To help students develop the skills of writing, they offer training on effective writing and referencing. Students are also allowed to access further support offered to them via writing seminars, library resources, and services of specialist staff.

Many researchers attempted to investigate proof-readers' beliefs and/or experiences. Harwood et al. (2012) and Mason (2017) researched on whether informant proof-readers tried to make writers aware of how they could become better proof-readers of their own work. Turner (2011) also examined how different stakeholders, with an interest in student writing, conceptualized the practice of proofreading. It was revealed that the concerns and standpoints of the three different informant groups involved in the study were consistent: 1) the professors highlighted the need for conventionally correct well-written academic prose and conceived proofreading as "broadly supportive of the learning process"; 2) the students expressed anxieties about getting their written work right, and about communicating their ideas effectively to their intended audience; and 3) the writing specialists raised concerns that students do not learn from having their work proofread, and emphasized "differentiating and distancing their professional role from that of proofreading, which is seen as non-pedagogic". Moreover, in an interview-based study of proof-readers' beliefs and practices, Harwood (2018) put the different proofreading interventions under four headings (copyediting, stylistic editing, structural editing, and content editing). The study showed that proofreading interventions mainly aim to correct "bibliographical information for accuracy, correcting to ensure that all references in the text appear in the bibliography, deleting irrelevant or unnecessary content, correcting to ensure the consistency of content, and enhancing the sense of confidence". This suggests that the main task of proof-readers is to correct errors in the text and its presentation.

Proofreading can be conceived as one of the three sides of a triangle, the other two sides being students and their professors (or the institution they are studying at). The three are so closely interrelated to the point that, whenever approached for study or investigation, they have to be studied all together, equally and within the context of an integrated plan. It follows that the study of one of them, would necessarily involve the study of the other two. By digging into contextually relevant literature, it can be concluded that a plethora of research has been devoted to one side of the triangle (proof-readers) at the cost of the other two. A noticeable lack of research does actually exist in relation to students and their professors (the other two sides of the triangle). Studies abound on proof-readers: how they conceptualize the practice of proofreading, what are their incentives to mediate between students and their professors, what type of proofreading

services they may afford, and when is the appropriate time for them to step in (Turner, 2011). On the other hand, questions such as why and when academic supervisors, university professors and lecturers would request their university students to have their theses and other course assignments proofread are still un-scrutinized areas of study and hence need ample effort by way of research. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by answering these related questions.

## METHODS

This study was mainly qualitative using three procedures; semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaire and document analysis of lecturers' feedback on theses. The questionnaire was successfully administered to 42 academic staff. It was divided into two main sections. The first part consisted of demographic information about their gender, department, university, and nationality. The second part investigated if lecturers asked their students to proofread their text professionally (i.e. by giving it to an external proof-reader), and it also asked them to give reasons for their answers. The questions in the open-ended questionnaire were developed by the researcher. Then, the researcher asked two experts in the field to go through these questions and to comment on the design of the questionnaire and its appropriateness for the purpose of the study. Valuable feedback was obtained on both wording and format. Then, the questionnaire was piloted and modified as a result. The

interview questions aimed at eliciting more information from the academic staff regarding the purpose of consulting or not consulting a professional proof-reader. The interview schedule was also piloted and modified. Out of the 42 participants who responded to the questionnaire, 8 of them had follow-up interviews. Twenty five feedback sheets were collected from the academic staff interviewees. The lecturers' feedback was analysed in order to find out their actual practices, that is, if the lecturers actually ask their students' to use professional editing services.

## Data Analysis

Data from the surveys were analysed to show the number of academic staffs who asked their students to use professional proof-readers and those who did not encourage them to do so. The interview data was transcribed, and then analysed using NVivo software. The initial codes were developed by assigning a category label under each theme. The codes were given names close to the meaning they described. For example, the reasons teachers gave for not asking their students to use professional proofreading services was called [REASONS FOR NOT GETTING STUDENTS TO CONSULT A PROOFREADER]. As for the feedback analysis, I collected the feedback sheets written by the lecturers (all 8 interviewees). I looked at the sheets, trying to find evidence where these lecturers ask students to proofread their work or get it proofread by professionals.

## The Study Sample and Participants

The target population of this study comprised academic staff in UK universities. The sample was duly chosen through purposive random sampling, which 'involves taking a random sample of a small number of units from a much larger target population' (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In total, 42 British academic staff (lecturers, readers, professors) from five different UK universities participated in this study. The participants comprised people from different gender (male and female) and they taught MA students in five different disciplines (English language, Education, Computer Science, Marketing, and Law). They all had more than 7 years of experience in the evaluation of academic writing as they all supervised post-graduate students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings drawn from the survey, interviews and feedback sheets.

## The Survey Questionnaire

The analysis of the survey indicates that most lecturers (83%) did not ask their students (Native Speakers, (NS) or Non-Native Speakers (NNS) to get professional or non-professional proof-reading services. This is because, according to them, "it costs money" and "proof-reading is an essential part of the writing process - it is an essential part of the training and they should learn to do this themselves". Turner (2011) asserted that "having texts proofread meant the loss of a learning opportunity". The suggestion

is that proofreading may lead to preventing students from improving their academic writing skills. It seems that students are required to take responsibility for their own learning. Some academic staff also expressed the fear that the work could end up being somebody else's.

On the other hand, 17% of the lecturers noted that they asked their NS as well as NNS to proofread their text for several reasons. This means that proofreading is not confined to NNSs. A lecturer in the school of Law wrote, "regardless of whether a student is a native speaker, I approach proofreading on a case-by-case basis". This finding indicates that the issue of being native speaker did not play an important factor according to the lecturers. Many lecturers considered such behaviour a "discrimination against non-native students", expressing that NNS demonstrated high language proficiency and that it was very difficult to distinguish them from NS. According to the survey, the majority of academic staff agreed with the notion that the degree of proofreading intervention in student's written work normally varied depending on each students' English language abilities. One professor of Business stated, "It depends on the case. There are students that need help with their written English but there are cases where the students perform well as writers".

This clearly indicates that the requirements for proofreading are often inconsistent. That is, proofreading is not always necessary since many students need high IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores to be accepted onto

their programmes. They are expected to be able to write sufficiently well in English. However, this is not always the case, as stated by Hennebry et al. (2012), "research evidence suggests language proficiency tests may not be good indicators of students' actual ability". Academic staff in the survey also considered proofreading as an important step before assessing their students'' written works. The following response of a History professor is an example:

> "I will correct grammar in the first 6 months but it is very time consuming. Having a proof-reader means that I can focus on the academic content of the writing, rather than the way it is written. If it is not written well it is hard to know what the student is trying to say."

The suggestion here is that academic staff as assessors expect correct and well-written academic texts, which is usually not possible given the fact that the majority of students may not be able to produce error-free texts in the early stages of their academic studies. However, some academic staff were concerned with the meaning of the text regardless of the errors in students' writing. One professor in Computer Science illustrated this:

> "I only ask them to proof read their work professionally when their meaning is at risk due to grammatical and structural problems"

This clearly again indicated that the content and subject matter of the text is more important than the language of the text provided that this language does not obstruct meaning within the content. In line with this, Turner (2011) asserted that "it is the scientific discoveries that are important: language becomes important only in as much as these discoveries have to be communicated as clearly and correctly as possible".

## The Interviews

The interviews helped provide greater illustration to the responses provided by the lecturers in the survey questionnaire. On the issue of who needs proof-reading more, Native (NS) or Non Native Speakers (NNS), the survey results show that 83% of lecturers did not ask their students (NS) or (NNS) to get assistance from proof-readers. However, it was obvious from the interviews that language proficiency was not an issue. The problem was with composing in Academic Writing, which was a problem to Native Speakers as well.

> In the interview, one lecturer explained:

> "Non-natives can often speak and write sufficiently well that they do not require a proof reader… on the other hand, there are issues for native speaker students as well as they often do not write English to the expected standard, and their writing is often not comprehensible".

This finding does not go in line with Jenkins et al. (1993) who found that teachers at six universities spent much more time and energy evaluating NNS students' texts than NS's and that those teachers felt unhappy with this demand on time and resources. It

also disagrees with Harwood (2018) who argued that NNS were more advised by their teachers to get professional help from proof-readers than their NS peers.

Having adequate writing skills is one reason why most lecturers do not ask their students to proofread their text professionally. Forty three (43)% of the lecturers expressed the belief that the students exhibited high levels of English language competencies. One of the lecturers in the interview expressed that "being accepted on the programme shows that the students have already demonstrated high capability in English language writing". One reason for this finding might be attributed to the fact that the English language entry requirements in the universities vary between 6.5 and 7.5 score on the IELTS. This is confirmed by one of the lecturers who stated that "NNS are supposed to have adequate English language skills for academic writing in English as they have already scored 6.5 or more in the IELTS". Also, the pre-sessional EAP courses in the UK help students improve their academic language and literacy skills and prepare them to cope with the postgraduate academic requirements (Seviour, 2015).

More than half of the lecturers did not want their students to be faced with paying for the high costs for professional proofreading. Those lecturers stated that since the tuition fees the students paid were already high, they did not want to add more financial burden on them. Interestingly, students found the high cost of employing proof-readers as the most important reason

for not consulting them (Alkhatib, 2019).

Instead, many lecturers believed students should use the non-paid options such as in consulting a friend or in seeking peer feedback. As noted by one of the lecturers in the interview:

"We recommend students make the most of the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support services, workshops and resources offered at the University. We do not encourage students to incur financial costs such as in paying money for proof reading. We advise engaging a fellow student or for them to exchange work and proof read in a reciprocal arrangement."

This finding corresponds with Turner (2011) who revealed that teachers could send their students to see their learning advisors or tutors to get some proofreading advice. This finding also indicates that lecturers also considered students' financial issues. As a result, some of them preferred to identify very early the students who had language problems and gave them possible money-saving solutions (rather than demanding that they sought professional proof-readers):

"I always wait to see written work because assumptions about written standard based on native/non-native speaker experience are often wrong. If students seem to need such intervention I will meet them, perhaps try to partner them with a reading buddy in the group, or discuss with them options for improving the quality of their work"

As a result, some lecturers taught their students the techniques for proofreading instead of asking them to pay for an external proof-reader. One of those teachers stated that, "It is better to teach the students how to proofread instead of getting them to pay money to a proof-reader. I train them on the techniques for proofreading."

According to 49% of the lecturers, proof-readers might intervene at the levels of factual accuracy and content which was "dangerous as the work might end up being somebody else's". This finding supports Harwood et al. (2009) who warned that the advisor then, would have to "make such significant corrections" the consequence of which would be awarding a grade that did not actually reflected students' real academic achievements. Other lecturers were concerned that the students might deal with unprofessional proof-readers who might change the meaning of the text. This finding agrees with the finding of Salter-Dvorak (2019) whose student participants in UK described professional proofreading as being "dodgy". This was also agreed upon by teachers. One teacher said: "I do not ask students to commit to proofreading as I am concerned that an unknowledgeable proof-reader may wrongly change the meaning of text by mistake".

There were 18% of the lecturers who stated that they required their students, both NSs and NNSs to proofread their text. Those lecturers and professors agreed with Turner's (2011) findings which highlighted the need for consulting third-party services

(proof-readers) as it supports the learning process. The finding also supports McNally and Kooyman (2017) who stated that proof-readers provided a "scaffolding" to help the novice writer acquire the necessary composition skills. According to the present study, lecturers think that the submitted work needs to be complete in terms of the language accuracy and that both native and non-native students need to proofread their written work if they feel their writing is not meeting the academic standards required of by their respective institutions. For these lecturers, proofreading was important as it would save them time when evaluating students' work. One lecturer noted in the interview:

> "I tell them that they need to use the services of a proof-reader, and that if they know their writing has linguistic problems, they should do this. It is an opportunity for them to improve the linguistic level of their writing. The aim is to make their text comprehensible and to remove linguistic errors"

This also goes in line with the feedback given by some other lecturers. One lecturer, for example, commented on her student, and verbalized a typical response she would give her, "You must ask someone to proofread your work for you as there are too many grammatical errors for me to correct (e.g. missing words, misplaced commas and some sentences don't make sense)."

A few lecturers expressed that proofreading was "an appropriate strategy" for some students as they will try to imitate

the style of the proof-reader and eventually improve, but "it is not effective for all students". This issue might be attributed to the diversity of international students in UK universities. Such growing diversity probably suggests having differences within students' abilities and needs, and it indicates that they should take these needs into considerations. Some students may have had their undergraduate studies in countries where writing conventions differ from that in UK universities. Harwood and Petrić (2016) referred to this issue stating, "Most international students come to the UK after completing their first degree in their home or another country where the requirements and expectations may differ markedly from the UK system."

This of course complicates the issue. Students have to unlearn conventions which may be acceptable elsewhere but not in the UK.

**The Feedback Sheets**

Triangulation of data was possible from the content analysis carried out on the feedback sheets. These were the comments from supervisors to their supervisees. There was evidence of supervisors directing their students towards services offered by proof-readers. There was also evidence, as in this case that the university itself endorsed this practice and the Department had a panel of proof-readers available for students, "I suggest you get your work proofread carefully. If you think you cannot do it yourself, you may need to choose a professional proof-reader from the list provided by the department."

Alkhatib (2019) found that some students complained that the academic department support centre was not as effective as it only guided the students towards a list of proof-readers but did not help them with regards selection. Similarly, Starfield (2016) explained how students' academic support centres provided students with only a list of freelance proof-readers students could approach. They rarely advised students regarding the specializations and quality of services of these proof readers. In another feedback sheet, a Professor of Education wrote the following comment for her student:

> "You must ask someone to proof read your work for you as there are too many grammatical errors for me to correct (e.g. missing words, misplaced commas and some sentences don't make sense)."

After two months, the revised draft revealed that the student still had language problems. The problems were mostly in grammar, organisation of ideas, and word choice. The professor wrote the following comment for the student:

> "There are still a lot of grammatical errors in your work, with missing words affecting the flow of your writing. You need to ask someone to proofread your work before it is submitted"

It appeared that the student did not take the professor's instructions seriously. This means that although academic staff insisted that their students should proofread their

work to make their text comprehensible and to remove linguistic errors, some students were not usually aware of the importance of proofreading before submitting their written work.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the surveys and interviews were consistent, indicating that while some lecturers tend to ask their students to consult professional proof-readers, most lecturers stated that they never asked their students to consult professional proof-readers for several reasons: high cost of proof-reading services, the risk of content distortion, and the desire to produce students who are able to proofread their own work and to bring about awareness in them that proof-reading is the responsibility of writers. However, only a few lecturers stated that they train their students to proofread their writing and/or implement peer feedback routines among them.

It seems that proofreading whether done by students themselves or by their tutors or other parties remains a complex issue in UK higher education. The complexity of proofreading stems from the absence of clear policies and guidelines for the practice of proofreading in UK universities (Harwood et al., 2009)

The study recognizes a number of limitations common to perception studies. First, the data collected is based on lecturers and students' self-report. The demand for proofreading is a complex issue because it depends on individualized experience. It should be investigated using in-depth methods such as ethnography. Second, the feedback sheets were analysed without consulting the students about their viewpoints regarding their lecturers' guidance on proofreading. It might be that some students misunderstood what their lecturers meant when they ask them to proofread their work. Moreover, the data collected came from a mixture of different disciplines where the demands and the reasons for proofreading might vary across these disciplines (e.g. Humanities versus Science).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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