'Accept This Change': Corrections to English Academic Writing of Advance Non-native Graduate Students by English Native-Speaking Editors

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Abstract

Native-speaking (NS) editors' amendments and corrections to texts written by non-native-speaking (NNS) graduate students were analyzed considering two theoretical stances: error correction and editor's role. Proofreading and editing studies have given much attention to editors' role in detecting and correcting flaws in NNS scholarly writing against a set of conventions and standards. However, the native-speaking editor's role in providing idealized versions of text, even when there are none or few language errors, has often been overlooked. NS editors' changes to a corpus of about 14000 words of academic writing by NNS Saudi graduate students were analyzed. The analysis was informed by parameters set by previous studies on corrections and editing, yet using a taxonomy specifically developed for the purpose of this research. The analysis resulted in categorizing most revisions as mechanic, syntactic, semantic and discourse. However, the analysis detected revisions that do not fit into any of these categories. More than one third of the revisions made were classified as restating grammatically correct English sentences or parts of sentences. These changes were found to be related to ideas and meaning, or organization. Editors' amendments to grammatically correct texts were thus classified into two categories: reorganizing content and modifying meaning. Findings of this study call for revisiting the long existing debate on correctness, and appropriateness of scholarly texts written by NNS academics. More importantly, however, this study aims to highlight the issue of the NS editor's authority and raise questions on how dependent NNS scholars are on NS editors.

Keywords: ESL/EFL/EAP Writing, Revision Analysis, Editing, Editors' Role, Corrective Feedback

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Introduction

L2 writing is challenging, and writers need help to perfect it, for accuracy and readability. The process of reviewing or correcting English academic writing by nonnative speakers (NNS) has been investigated by researchers within different theoretical frameworks including error analysis, revision studies, corrective feedback and editors' role and practices. The topic is wide and versatile, ranging from typologies of corrective feedback in pedagogical settings to editors' changes to research papers submitted for publishing in different fields of knowledge. The concern of this paper is to examine the nature and types of corrections and changes made by native speaking (NS) editors to understand and analyze their scope, linguistic level, and effect on meaning and coherence, and to shed light on changes that are not direct corrections of linguistic forms.

Error analysis is a methodological approach that, in the 70s and 80s, provided parameters in classifying NNS writing errors and the corrections of these errors. Error analysis is often investigated within second language acquisition theories and linked to constructs of SLA such as interlanguage, intralanguage and transfer (e.g., Corder, 1975, Chan 2010, Andrian, 2015, Chan, 2010). Chan (2010) identified errors at four linguistic levels in the writing of Cantonese ESL learners: morphological, lexical, syntactic and discourse. These levels included 32 types of errors that were compiled based on the data obtained, including misuse of conjunctions and prepositions: incorrect word order, missing subjects, and misuse of relative clauses and independent clauses. Moreover, Kaplan and Baldauf (2005) put forward a fundamental classification that would account for revisions of texts written by NNSs, namely language management and organization management. "One finding shows that it is difficult, in practice, to differentiate between simple language management issues and organized language management issues" (p 47).

Another major approach to error detection and amendment in NNE writing is corrective feedback in the context of EFL/ESL writing. Ellis (2009), for example, looked at the nature of corrective feedback and attempted to develop a typology of written corrective feedback in order to investigate the effect of different types of feedback. Ferris (1999) argues for the usefulness of corrective feedback in acquiring linguistic competence. Other studies (e.g., Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005) provided evidence of grammar improvement with corrected feedback but the improvement was not consistent across different writing tasks and a long time.

Problems and response to flaws in academic writing, and EFL writing in general, have also been observed and investigated from editing to scholarly writing. Editors' responses or amendments to research articles submitted for publication provided bases for much debate on the topic (e.g., Flowerdew, 2000; Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Kaplan and Baldauf, 2005; Harwood 2019). Such research has often pinpointed areas of difficulties NNS face when writing scholarly articles.

Similar to the versatility of the purposes of corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009), the role of the editor has often been discussed in different contexts with debates on the extent to which an editor alters the text. Research that was conducted in the context of editing of texts submitted for publication has often emphasized the dominant role of editors and questioned it ethically, in other words: to what extent can a proofreader/editor ethically amend NNE texts (Harwood, 2019). Burrough-Boenisch (2003) distinguished the role of a reviewer as opposed to a copy editor. Burrough-Boenisch (2003) went further on to raise awareness of the relevance of

editors' work to ESP training. Willey and Tanimoto (2015) used the term "convenience editors", which refers to NS English teachers, who perform editing without training specialized knowledge about. The advantages of convenience editing is that editor's unfamiliarity with the topic will yield more focus on the clarity of the message. They would be more able to grasp the intuition of the authors. Burrough-Boenisch (2003) distinguished the role of a reviewer as opposed to a copy editor. Burrough-Boenisch (2003) went further on to raise awareness of the relevance of editors' work to ESP training and advocated that EAP/ESP teachers could contribute to training people for "this emerging profession".

Participants, Data and Analysis

The participants of this study are two NS editors and four female students. The NS editors, members of an institutional academic support team, have 10+ years' experience in English language teaching as well in dealing with NNE writing and/or editing/proofreading research papers. The four students are all NNS but possess high level of mastery of English language. They are enrolled in an MA program (on the field of teaching English as a second/foreign language) in a Saudi university. The researcher obtained the students' consent to get their writing edited for the purpose of this research. The written texts were submitted in fulfillment of assignments or term papers in two of the MA courses taught by the researcher.

The corpus on which this study draws comprises 13922 words from eight edited subject related writing tasks. The texts are in the 'Track Changes' Review format, and so the original writing is easily detectable. The data to be analyzed are all the edits to these texts referred to in this study as "corrections," "changes" or "modifications." All the corrections/changes were put in a templet table with two columns indicating the before and after text, three more columns indicating the effect of the correction being on form or meaning, the scope of the correction, and level of the correction. A sixth column was devoted to comments or further classifications, especially for the edits that were done on accurate text.

The researcher-coder worked on finding the changes in the documents, extracting them, and putting them in the before-and-after templet, and analyzing them on three dimensions: (i) Formal *vs* Conceptual, (ii) Scope, (iii) Level (Table 1). The **goal of analysis is to c**haracterize editors' modifications, with reference to their categories and frequencies. Each correction/change was categorized at the three following dimensions.

1. Effect of modification: if the modification resulted in a change to the **form** (language) or **concept** (meaning).

2. Scope of modification: the physical stretch of text covered by a change.
   - Word: Changes within the single word or morphemes within the word
   - Phrase: Phrase-level revisions are done to noun phrases, verb phrases, adverbial phrases, adjective phrases, and prepositional phrases in a way that is acting within the phrase without affecting the structure of the sentence.
   - Sentence: Including revisions within a clause or at close boundary, e.g., combining clauses or integrating a clause into sentence. It also includes changes to relationships between clauses.
   - Text: moving, deleting, and adding a minimum of one sentence or a clause around text. It also includes adding a title or an introduction, or revisions to paragraphing.

3. Level of modification: the linguistic component influenced by the change:
   ◦ Orthographic and mechanics: include spelling, punctuation, capitalization, punctuation, indentation, and re-paragraphing (splitting or combining paragraphs).
   ◦ Syntactic/ morpho-syntactic: changes to sentence structure; or changes within morphemes (words, etc.) because of their grammatical function/location or relation to the surrounding elements.
   ◦ Semantic: changes or modifications made to the meaning of a word or an utterance.
   ◦ Discourse: changes that affect the text beyond the sentence, including cohesion, changes to the structure of text, sequencing and linking. (How elements of the discourse fit together, e.g., adding or deleting discourse marker, such as "because").

Table 1: Dimensions of the analysis and possible intersection amongst them

Scope	Morpheme/Word (W)		Phrase (NP/VP/PP/AP/ADJP)		Sentence (S)		Text (D)	
Effect Level	**Form**	**Concept**	**Form**	**Concept**	**Form**	**Concept**	**Form**	**Concept**
Orthographic/ Mechanic	Capitalization/ Spelling	X	apostrophe in possessive 's, word order	X	punctuation	X	joining or splitting sentences and paragraphs	
Syntactic/ morpho-syntactic	(go, goes)	Verb tense	Articles, plural vs singular	Modifiers; quantifiers; determiners	Verb subject agreement	Within sentence	X	X
Semantic	Word category	Word choice	X	Modification to meaning Articles*	X	Modification to proposition	X	X
Discourse	X	X	X	X	X	X	Restructuring, rearranging, adding, deleting, moving.	

Findings and Discussion

As the researcher coder extracted corrections and analyzed them at the three dimensions, a number of issues appeared. The first is the complexity of editors' changes. There would be multiple changes to a sentence or more, and it would be difficult to decide if the editor corrected the mistakes one by one or had decided to rewrite the whole segment in another way. Sometimes the researcher would mark these instances and get back to the editor for clarification. Table 2 shows an example of multiple corrections.

Table 2: Sample coding templet showing multiple corrections

R#	Before	After	F/C	Scope	Level
11	Most important term was a term presented by Holec (1981) whom is considered the father and the founder of individual and autonomous language learning. … . "to say of a learner that he is autonomous is to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning" (As cited in Schmenk, 2005, p. 4).	Holec (1980), largely regarded as the father of autonomous language learning theory, defines autonomous learning as the learner being "capable of taking charge of his own learning" (As cited in Schmenk, 2005, p. 4).	F	text	discourse
12	considered	regarded as	F	W	semantic
13	considered the father and the founder	regarded as the father ~~and the founder~~	C	NP	semantic
14		[the relative clause is restated instead of correcting 'whom']	F	S	discourse
15		[the quoted definition is moved from the end of the paragraph to this place.]	F	text	discourse
16		[moving this chunk of text to the next paragraph]	F	text	discourse

The editor made a number of changes to the above text while reorganizing the content. The first impression is that the editor chose rephrasing instead of correcting (R#11). However, a closed look at the changes reveals smaller corrections: replacing a lexical item with another (R#12), removing similar adjective (R#13), reorganizing the definition for clarity (R#14), synthesizing content by combining the introduction of Holec and his quoted definition (R#15), and finally moving the modified text about Holec to the next paragraph to join other scholars' opinions and definitions (R#16).

Another issue was determining Scope. For some feedback modifications, it is often difficult, based on the Before/After excerpts listed in the coding sheet, to determine the Scope of the error: phrase, clause, sentence, text. To assist in this determination, the first two columns of the coding sheets were expanded to show more extensive chunks of text in the Before/After columns. When needed, larger chunks of text were put in the before/after columns at their first analysis, even if they contain multiple corrections, and subsequent corrections were characterized in the following rows without repeating the text chances again (e.g., rows 12-16 in Table 2).

Coding changes in verb tense from present simple to past simple, e.g. rows 48 and 49 (Table 3), there was uncertainty about whether such correction should be coded as having the level "Discourse" rather than "Syntactic." The student writer is most likely able to distinguish between present and past, but she has consistently used the present tense throughout the text, which means that it is her decision about the whole discourse. The editor, as well, seems to be consistent in correcting the tenses based on her knowledge about academic discourse conventions (i.e., reporting research procedure).

Table 3: Sample coding of verb tense correction

R#	Before	After	F/C	Scope	Level
48	The steps are clear	The steps were clear	F	VP	Discourse
49	and directs	and directed	F	VP	Discourse

Likewise, the semantic level of correction wasn't always easy to define as form or concept. While semantic level denotes meaning, and meaning is inherently relevant to concept, the semantic corrections in rows 56 and 57 (Table 4) of the sample were coded differently.

Table 4: Sample coding of Form/Concept coding

R#	Before	After	F/C	Scope	Level
56	The writer	The authors	C	W	Semantic
57	The writer	The authors	F	W	Semantic

The analysis yielded data on categories of changes that are not direct corrections of mistakes or writing flows. The editors often added words and phrases to clarify or enhance meaning, or even to modify meaning. Some of these changes were words or phrases and some of them extend beyond the sentence and influenced a larger scope of text. These types of modifications accounted for more than a third of the total number of revisions. The best way to look at them was probably to analyze the underlying reasons for these changes. The editors seem to have taken authority to change students' text to clarify meaning. In row 83 (Table 5) for example, the adjectives 'overall' and 'language' add clarification to the word 'proficiency', while in row 105, the adverb 'specifically' enhanced the meaning and purpose of the following sentence. Also, there have been changes to text based on academic discourse conventions (row 119), and discourse coherence (121).

Table 5: Some occurrences of changes to grammatically correct text

R#	Before	After	F/C	Scope	Level	Possible purpose of editors' changes
83	The proficiency level of the learners was low.	The overall language proficiency level of the learners was low.	C	NP	Semantic	MC*
105	Learners in each session would	Specifically, learners in each session would	C	S	Discourse	ME**
119	Two major points, {nothing}	Two major points; first …	F	S	Discourse	AD***
121	scaffolding through the essay cycle.	scaffolding through the essay cycle and second, …	F	T	Discourse	DC****

*Meaning clarification, ** Meaning Enhancement, ***Academic discourse, ****Discourse coherence.

The total number of tracked changes made by the editors was 1570. That is about 11.3 change per hundred words (total word count of the sample texts was 13922). 52.65% (n=725) of these changes had an effect on form, and 46.75 (n=734) affected meaning of the modified text. The scope of text affected by editors' corrections was mostly within a word, with almost 30% of the changes, and the least was on Text (Table 6).

Table 6 Occurrences of different Scope of modification

	Word	Phrase	Sentence	Text
N	469	428	346	244
%	29.88	27.27	22.08	15.58

As for the linguistic level of changes, almost half of the changes were made at the level of semantics 45.45%, with the minimum changes made at the syntactic level (Table 7).

Table 7 Occurrences of modifications at different linguistic levels

	Semantic	Mechanic	Syntactic	discourse
N	714	387	142	326
%	45.45	24.68	9.09	20.78

Conclusion and Implications

Identifying and categorizing corrections made to NNS academic writing by NS editors is a complex process. The categories employed in this research might be useful in distinguishing formal and conceptual corrections, as well as the linguistic level of the treated error. However, and more importantly, editors were found to go beyond the correction of language to changing, enhancing, and correcting meaning. Moreover, sometimes the editors would go

beyond meaning modifications, to modify longer stretches of text synthesizing and reorganizing content. In doing so editors make use of their knowledge about the writing tasks, academic writing conventions and about the real world. In doing so, English native speaking editors seem to take a great deal of authority in correcting and modifying graduate students' academic texts.

The high number of amendments to language, to academic discourse conventions and to content and organization enhance the long existing debates on correctness, and appropriateness of scholarly texts written by NNS academics. Such a debate could highlight the issue of the native speaker authority and raise questions on how dependent nonnative speaking emerging scholars are on native-speaking editors. In fact, the action 'Accept this Change', which is often the action taken by the student writers when they get their edited work back, denotes the passive role o9f the student writers, especially under the constraints of time.

Methodologically, research with such large data and multiple-dimension analysis demonstrated the difficulty and complexity of capturing feedback modifications, and analyzing their scope and effect, as well as the difficulty of assessing editors' role.

The categorizations proposed in this paper have potential for further research and investigation. Since the language proficiency level of the participants here is quite high, perhaps studying samples from language levels will yield significant findings relevant to English language learning and teaching.

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