

Mirror, Mirror: Improving the Technical Accuracy of Writing through Teaching Reflective Proofreading Strategies in KS3 English Lessons

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Abstract

Over the course of my practice as a Trainee Teacher, I have been frustrated by the number of technical errors (in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and improper capitalisation) found in pieces of writing submitted by Year 7 students. What makes this too-frequent experience more frustrating is the knowledge that should these students be asked about the errors made, they would recognise that they had been made and, more often than not, they would know how to fix them. Identifying that the problem therefore lies in the proofreading process, or lack thereof, the aim of this research is to gain an understanding of why students submit work that does not reflect their ability so far as the technical accuracy of their writing is concerned.

An initial writing assessment and questionnaires were used to establish students' current proofreading ability and to gauge their opinions about proofreading, including perception of difficulties and importance. A number of strategies were implemented over a series of lessons, after which a second writing assessment was set and marked to ascertain the impact of the intervention. The results of the questionnaire and intervention are analysed, followed by a discussion of findings including recommendations and implications for my own practice as a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT).

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Introduction

The importance of equipping students with the capacity to express themselves accurately cannot be underestimated; as the self-proclaimed maverick Phil Beadle (2015, pp. 4-5) writes, literacy is “a bulwark against poverty...a platform for democratisation...the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realise his or her full potential”. From a national perspective, the *State of the Nation* report (Social Mobility Commission 2017, p. 16) sets out the duty schools have to “provide children with the skills and confidence to succeed educationally and in the labour market”. This report also found that the East Midlands, the region in which this research project was undertaken, has the lowest social mobility scores in the country. The ability to proofread and thus to produce cohesive and accurate writing is an undeniable aspect of these aforementioned skills for success, both educationally and in the workplace. If we as educators fail to teach our students how to proofread, we are potentially narrowing their opportunities to engage with, and progress in, the world around them. Consequently, the research questions for this project are thus:

- Why don't students proofread?
- What do students find hard about proofreading?
- What strategies can teachers use to develop students' proofreading?

Literature Review

Whilst much is written and discussed about the importance of developing reflective *teachers*, less is written on the subject of developing reflective *students* (Cavilla 2017). A reflective student can take many guises. However, for the purposes of this essay I will be focussing on the concept of reflection most prevalent to the English

classroom: reflection on one's own writing through proofreading. The Oxford English Dictionary defines proofreading as "the reading of text in proof in order to find and mark errors for correction" (OED 2019). Whilst this definition offers a reasonable starting point, it is important to explore exactly what these errors and subsequent corrections might consist of. According to Smith and Sutton (1994), the potential areas for error are in sentence structure, grammar, use of punctuation, spelling, and capitalisation. It seems reasonable to accept this list as comprehensive; if a student were to produce a piece of work without errors in any of the aforementioned areas, the piece of work would have a high degree of technical accuracy. Evidently, the quality of a piece of writing cannot be judged on its technical accuracy alone. After all, it would be possible to write a technically sound essay with entirely inaccurate content. However, once we begin to consider the *meaning* of a piece of writing, and delve into the realms of content and style, we stray out of the jurisdiction of proofreading and into what Smith and Sutton (1994, p.3) term "editing". Not everybody makes this distinction; in her insightful essay on teaching proofreading skills, Jessie Carduner (2007) uses the two terms interchangeably. Whilst both are inarguably vital elements of the writing process, and thus important skills for students to master in the course of their education, editing as a concept is too expansive to be explored in the constraints of this project. Smith and Sutton (1994) define editing as the process of ensuring a document is clear, concise, coherent, concrete, considerate and complete. They go on to acknowledge the difference between this and proofreading, stating that as a writer "you will engage in actual rewriting when you are editing— but not when you are proofreading" (1994, p.3). Ultimately, this is the priority for exam preparation; whilst time should be made during an exam to

proofread work for technical accuracy, under these conditions rewriting to amend style is unrealistic.

Understanding what proofreading is and what it might look like in practice is, however, only half of the battle. It is essential that we recognise why proofreading is so important and, more urgently, ask whether or not students see the value in it. Kathleen Andrasick (1993, p. 28) seems to be of the belief that students do not intrinsically see the value in proofreading, insisting that “if we want students to write mechanically clean prose, we must first persuade them to value doing so”. What is the value of proofreading? Being able to proofread is a skill that will enable students to secure higher grades in their GCSE exams. There are marks available for technical accuracy at several instances in the English Literature and Language mark schemes. In order to secure all of the marks available for technical accuracy, learners must “spell and punctuate with consistent accuracy, and consistently use vocabulary and sentence structures to achieve effective control of meaning” (AQA 2017, p.8). Whilst they may only make up a small percentage of the marks available, these marks can be the difference between grade boundaries. Proofreading is certainly an important skill for students to master in anticipation of their GCSE examinations. However, if we are to instil in students a lifelong capacity for self-improvement and development, we must assist in their progression into confident and consistent proofreaders. Yancey (1998, p.5) expresses this view in her book *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, in which she states that we must use the process of reflection as a tool to enable students to become “agents of their own learning”. The importance of teaching students how to proofread is also addressed by Nidus and Sadler (2016, p. 62), who acknowledge that proofreading and the skills it entails are “the backbone of college and career readiness”. Nidus and Sadler

(2016) go on to explore the idea that, while many teachers are perfectly adept at delivering sessions teaching the discipline of writing, the process of revising and correcting this work is not often taught, instead being left to the students to dissect (or not, as is often the case) for themselves. This leaves students with a problem; whilst they may be fully on-board with the proof reading process and keen to improve their work prior to submitting it, they may lack the knowledge of what they should be seeking to improve on, and how they should go about making such improvements. Research published by Dockrell, Marshall and Wyse (2015, p. 410) suggests that there is “a close link between classroom teaching and the writing produced by students”. Though this hardly seems ground-breaking, it is perhaps more surprising to hear that this research found that “instructional quality has been shown to be uniquely related to children’s written composition over and above child-level predictors” (2015, p. 410). Poole, Jones and Whitfield (2012) also discuss the lack of clarity surrounding the teaching of reflecting on writing. So what exactly is it about the process of reflection on, and consequent improvement of, one’s writing that is challenging to teach?

Certain literature suggests that these skills are simply not being taught in the classroom. In her revealingly titled article *Proofreading: The Skill We’ve Neglected to Teach*, Jan Madraso (1993, p.32) states that “proofreading is a necessary skill that is much talked about – but rarely taught”. This lack of instruction regarding the process of proofreading would certainly explain the apparent absence of any proofreading that I have observed in written work submitted by students. It has even been suggested that, so far as grammar is concerned, direct instruction is of no benefit in supporting writing development (Jones, Myhill and Bailey 2013). There is, however, a somewhat more palatable explanation for teachers: that teaching proofreading is

simply extremely difficult. Writers such as Carduner (2007, p. 283) acknowledge the attempts made by teachers, and address the problems teachers face in teaching proofreading. This includes recognising that although “learners often accurately and consistently apply a rule to a grammar exercise”, they then “fail to apply the same rule in open-ended writing assignments”. There are a number of approaches suggested to teach proofreading successfully; methods such as prewriting activities and specific strategy instruction have proven successful in previous studies (Dockrell, Marshall and Wyse 2015). In *Developing Correctness in Student Writing: Alternatives to the Error Hunt*, Rosen proposes the following strategies:

- running a blank sheet of paper slowly down the composition so the writer is forced to read one line at a time
- reading one sentence at a time from the bottom up to take each sentence out of context and thus focus on errors, not meaning
- circling all suspected spelling errors before consulting a dictionary
- reading aloud to oneself or a friend, or reading into a tape recorder and playing it back
- listing three of one's most frequent errors at the top of the paper, then reading the paper three times, each time focusing on one of these

(Rosen 1987, p. 67)

Evidently, some of these strategies are more practical than others in a classroom of 32 students. Reading work aloud, for instance, is unlikely to create an atmosphere conducive to careful listening and self-reflection when you are simultaneously hearing the voices of 31 other students. Madraso (1993, p. 34) suggests that instead learners “sub-vocalise”, an exercise that involves the use of a finger or pencil to point

to each word and mark of punctuation as the learner enacts a sort of silent reading aloud of the text in their head. In addition, Rosen's final suggestion requires a degree of understanding on the learner's behalf of what their most common errors are. For many students, this may vary depending on the focus of the writing. For instance, many learners err in their use of quotation marks when citing texts in reading assessments; this would not be a problem in creative writing assignments, where every word written is the student's own. Additionally, Rosen does not give much detail explaining the *type* of errors that should be listed. Would a learner simply write 'spelling' as one of their frequent errors, for example, or would they write a specific word that they repeatedly have difficulty getting right?

A number of these suggestions do, however, seem logical and practical. It is also worth recognising that these strategies need not be employed in isolation; in the intervention programme, students will be encouraged to use a number of these strategies when proofreading their final piece of writing. Perhaps the most interesting assertion Rosen (1987) makes is that students find it far easier to identify and correct errors in somebody else's work than it is in their own. Whilst this may be true, and a reasonable suggestion for proofreading formative assessments, this is evidently not an approach that students could adopt in an exam setting. Yet if we are equipping students with a number of different strategies, we must ask whether or not we are giving them sufficient time to enact them. In *The Secret of Literacy*, David Didau (2014) highlights the importance of giving students lesson time to improve their written work. Recognising that a large proportion of the writing done by students at school is rushed, Didau goes on to propose a more considered approach which he titles 'Slow Writing'. As the name suggests, the concept aims to encourage students

to focus on the quality of their writing as opposed to the quantity. Didau also asks students to double-space their writing, leaving ample room for making corrections and improvements as they are asked to examine each and every word, sentence, and paragraph. Rosen (1987) also addresses the importance of creating time specifically *for* proofreading, rather than leaving it to whatever time students have left after they have finished writing. The relationship between time management and proofreading will be discussed in greater detail below.

Methodology

This study is comprised of four component parts: an initial assessment of students' proofreading skills through the marking of a piece of creative writing, a questionnaire to assess students' confidence with and opinion of proofreading, a number of intervention strategies trialling various proofreading methods enacted in classroom time, and finally a second piece of creative writing which was again checked for technical accuracy. This final piece of creative writing gave students an opportunity to employ any of the proofreading strategies that they had been equipped with over the course of the intervention programme. The importance of using multiple data sources is recognised by Gorman and Clayton (2005), who discuss the role this approach plays in increasing the depth of the research undertaken. Whilst marking students' work before and after intervention is perhaps the most obvious method of assessing the intervention's efficacy, I also felt it important to give students the opportunity to express their feelings towards proofreading. The questionnaire provided the opportunity to assess students' confidence with, and understanding of, proofreading prior to initiating any intervention, and also gave the students an opportunity to express their ideas about the support they felt they needed in order to develop their proofreading skills. The design of a questionnaire is a nuanced

process. Bell and Waters (2014) provide helpful guidance to ensure that questionnaires are user-friendly, yet also yield the necessary information without making surplus demands of participants. This includes the importance of the aesthetics of the questionnaire; an untidy looking form that is hard to follow will not encourage completion. Instructions must be clear, questions should be spaced to allow for easy completion and analysis, and the questionnaire should be begin with straightforward questions. The excerpt below from the given questionnaire demonstrates how the above criteria were satisfied:

- 1) Roughly how long did you spend proofreading your writing? **Give your answer in minutes.**

- 2) How important do you think proofreading is as part of the writing process? **Tick one box only.**
 - Not important at all
 - A little important but not essential
 - Important sometimes, but not always
 - Very important
 - Absolutely essential

Instructions were provided in bold for each question to ensure that participants knew exactly what each section required of them. The questionnaire also began with simple questions, with more thought-provoking questions that required learners to reflect on their own learning preferences left for later.

In order to ensure that the questionnaire was serviceable, it was important to use a pilot run. Bell and Waters (2014) recognise this as an essential step in the process, giving an opportunity to spot any potential errors or irregularities within the

questionnaire and to make amendments as necessary. They also recognise this step as important in establishing the validity of the research. Sapsford and Jupp (see Bell and Waters 2014, p. 121) define validity as “the design of research to provide credible conclusions”. The questionnaire was therefore distributed to a number of family members prior to it being given to participants; whilst they could not complete the questionnaire with genuine answers, they confirmed that it was straightforward and made sense. These factors are important; if participants felt frustrated by aspects of the questionnaire, they may be less inclined to answer it honestly and in detail, resulting in less credible results and therefore a reduction in the validity of the research. Bell and Waters also discuss the importance of giving questionnaires directly to participants. The advantages of this direct contact include the opportunity it affords to explain the purpose of the questionnaire, and also to ensure that it is completed on the spot. Considering the ages of the participants, removing the onus for returning the questionnaire safely from the participants was an important step. The questionnaire was therefore distributed at the beginning of an English lesson shortly after the initial piece of writing had been finished, and students were informed that they had as much time as they needed to complete it to ensure answers were given due consideration and not rushed through. All 32 students in the class were present and completed the questionnaire.

In addition to gauging students’ perceptions and current practices, the questionnaire was used to inform a number of intervention strategies. The strategies were guided by student responses to the question *What do you think you would find useful to help you develop your proofreading skills?* The most common response given by students was simply to practise the skills involved in proofreading. The intervention in part

therefore consisted of a series of proofreading practices, each providing instructions for students to enact a different method of proofreading. These methods were created based on strategies aforementioned in the Literature Review. The second highest suggestion for improving proofreading skills was teacher-led revision of common spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) errors. A proportion of a fortnight's English lessons were therefore devoted to recapping and practising a number of rules that students commonly misuse in their writing.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the ethicality of the research methods used. Prior to undertaking any research, ethical approval was gained for the project from the Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee. This approval covers the above-outlined data collection methods. Securing ethical approval is a vital stage of any research project that involves human participants. What is even more important is that, as the project progresses, compliance with ethics is maintained. Ron Iphofen (2009, p. 173) acknowledges this in his work *Ethical Decision Making in Social Research*, in which he argues that "we can become so enmeshed in the pragmatics of conducting research ethically and ensuring appropriate scrutiny procedures that the fundamental principles upon which ethical practices are based can be neglected". For this reason, regular referrals were made to my approved Ethical Clearance Checklist during the course of this project to ensure that I did not lose sight of my responsibilities towards participants.

Participants

This research was conducted in the summer term of 2019 in a single-sex, 11-18 girls' school in Lincolnshire. The school is smaller than the average secondary school. Most of the students are from White British backgrounds, and the number of

students eligible for free school meals is below average. The number of students who have SEN is also below the national average. The study was conducted with a Year 7 class of 32 students; so far as ability is concerned, they are the second set in their year group. This class were chosen as, despite their high target grades, the quality of work they submit is regularly lowered by the level of technical accuracy. The study aims to improve their proofreading skills, thus equipping the participants with the ability to improve their technical accuracy and in turn their grades.

Initial Data Collection

The first stage in the process was to establish a baseline by assessing a piece of the participants' writing. The number of errors in each piece of work was recorded, with errors being sorted into 4 categories: spelling, punctuation, grammar, and capital letters.

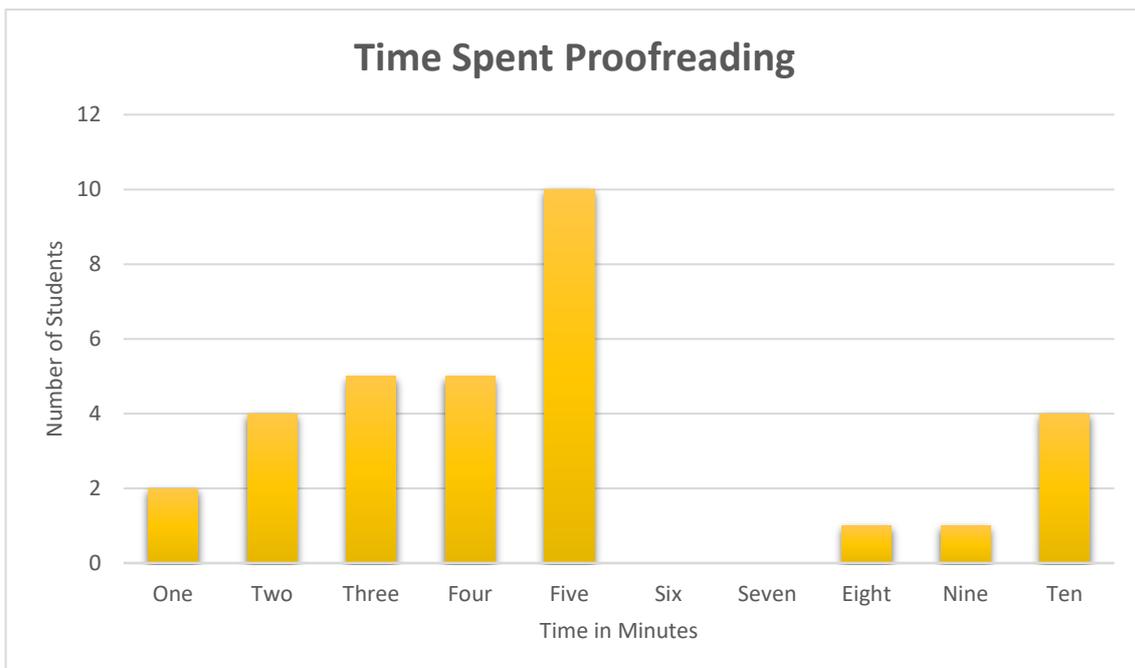
The second phase of the initial data collection process was the questionnaire. As aforementioned, students completed the questionnaire during an English lesson. This meant that no questionnaires went missing. The questionnaire was comprised of seven questions, each of which will be explored in isolation below. Students were given ample time to complete the questionnaire, and were reassured that all of the results were anonymous. The questionnaire was undertaken shortly after the baseline writing assessment, to ensure that students could reflect accurately on their proofreading process for that specific piece of work.

Figure 1: Table showing the number of errors made by students in the baseline assessment

Error Category	Total Number of Errors	Average per student (To 1 Decimal Place)
Spelling	117	3.7
Grammar	81	2.5
Punctuation	100	3.1
Capital Letters	89	2.8

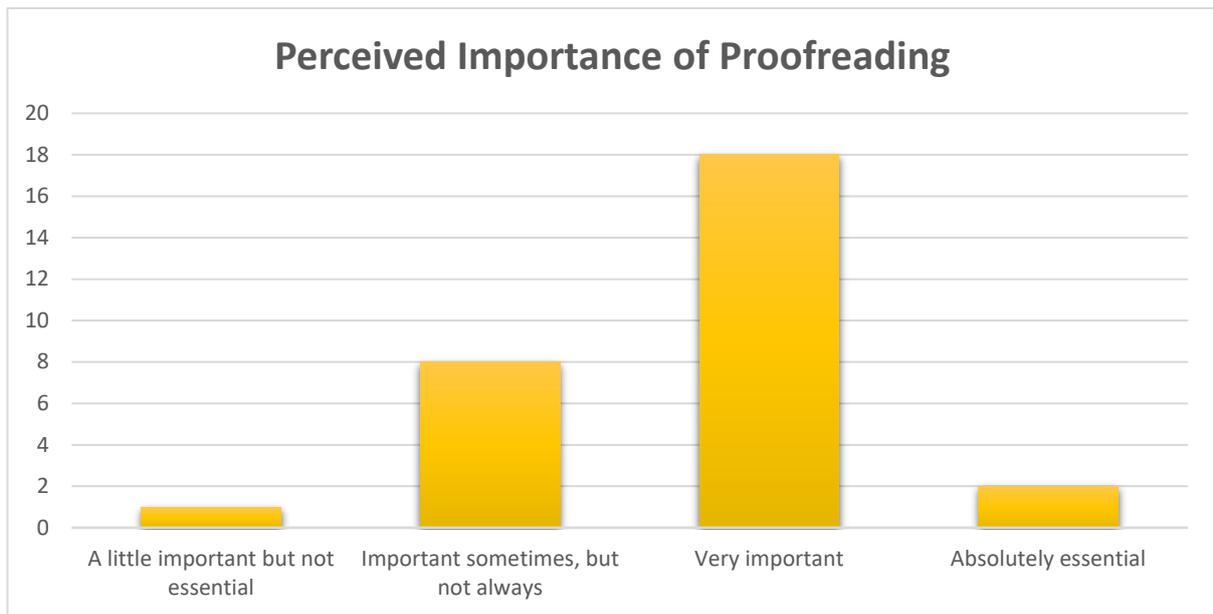
In the first piece of writing assessed, the highest number of errors were misspellings. This figure was closely followed by punctuation errors.

Figure 2: How long did you spend proofreading your writing?



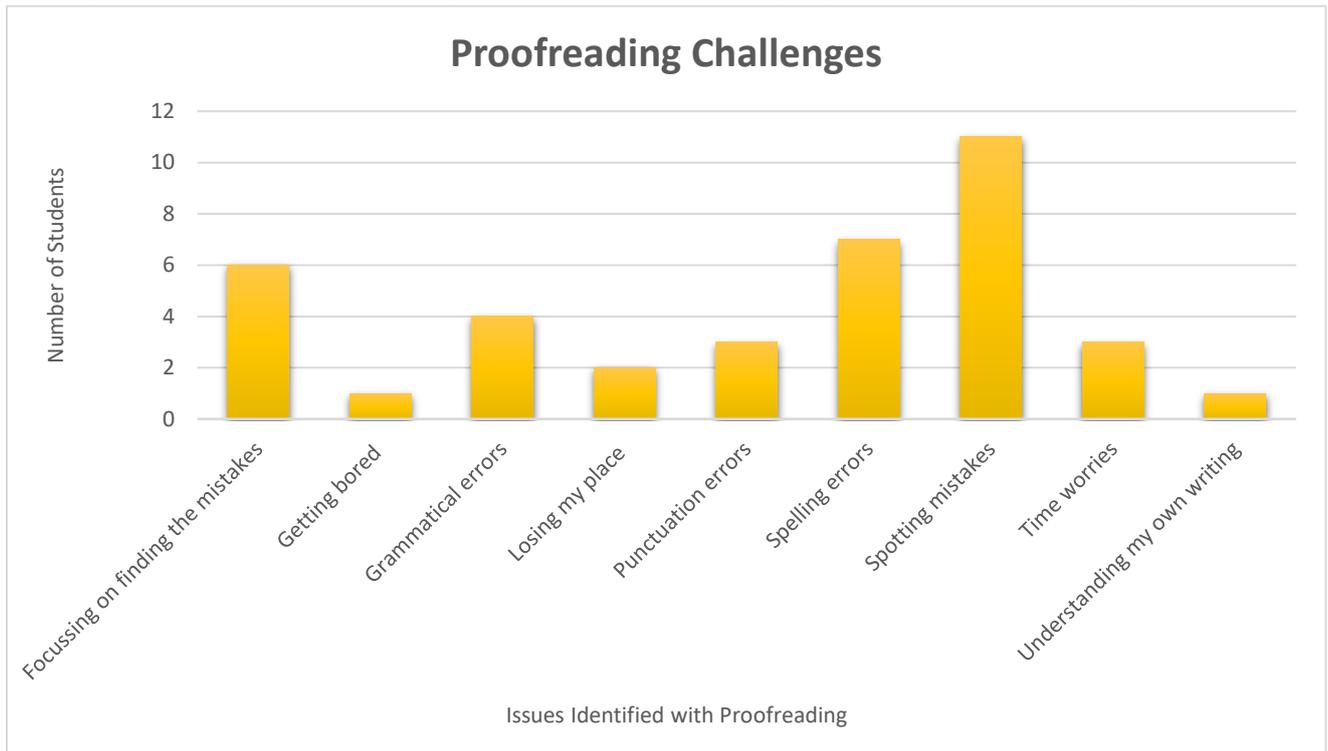
This question is a straightforward start to the questionnaire. It requires only recall on behalf of the students, and does not require them to challenge their own practices or ideas about proofreading. As seen in the graph, only 6 students spent longer than 5 minutes proofreading their work.

Figure 3: How important do you think proofreading is as part of the writing process?



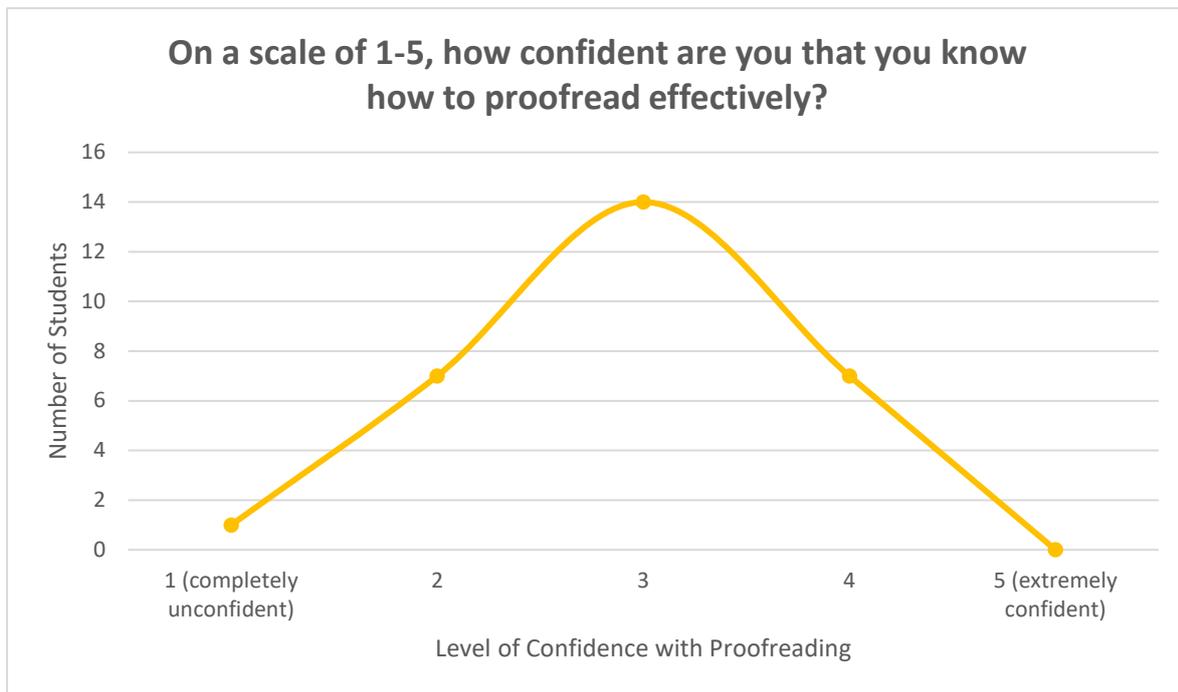
Although most students (18) deemed proofreading 'very important', only 2 recognised it as an essential part of the writing process.

Figure 4: What, if anything, do you find challenging about proofreading?



This question demonstrates the range of difficulties students listed when undertaking proofreading.

Figure 5: On a scale of 1-5, how confident are you that you know how to proofread effectively?



As the graph shows, none of the students felt extremely confident about their proofreading abilities. Perhaps more worryingly, 8 students felt severely lacking in confidence.

Figure 6: What do you think you would find useful to help you develop your proofreading skills?

Methods suggested by students	Number of suggestions
A dictionary	3
Being made to use the full time	5
A checklist	6
Peer-assessing	3
Practising	10
Reading aloud	2
Teacher instruction on SPaG	8

The most common method suggested by students (10) was simply to practise proofreading. The second highest suggestion (8) was teacher instruction on some of

the common SPaG errors students made. Interestingly, a small number of students (2) also identified reading aloud as a useful technique.

Figure 7: What methods do you use to proofread your work?

Proofreading Methods	Number of students
I read back through to see if anything stands out as wrong	25
I read my work aloud to see if it makes sense	10
I look at each word independently to check spellings	5
I focus on one aspect at a time, such as spellings, then punctuation, then grammar	16
Other	

Prior to intervention, only 25 out of 32 students said that they read back through their work to see if they could spot any errors.

Figure 8: Table showing the number of errors made by students in second piece of writing (post-intervention)

Error category	Total number of errors	Average per student (to 1 decimal place)	Change in average from pre-intervention writing
Spelling	67	2.1	-1.6
Grammar	20	0.6	-1.9
Punctuation	39	1.2	-1.9
Capital Letters	34	1.1	-1.7

Evidently, there were fewer errors in all areas of SPaG in students' second piece of writing. The greatest reductions, based on the average number of mistakes per student, were in punctuation and grammatical errors.

Analysis of data

Let us begin by exploring students' understanding and perception of proofreading, and simultaneously offering an answer to the primary research question of why students do not proofread. As the chart in Figure 3 shows, only 2 students out of the class recognised proofreading as an absolutely essential part of the writing process. This supports Andrasick's (1993) aforementioned assertion that students do not see the value in proofreading and therefore must be assured of its worth before they can be convinced to do it. With that being said, the majority of students (18) did recognise proofreading as a 'very important' part of the writing process. However, as seen in Figure 2, only 6 students spent longer than 5 minutes proofreading their writing. This does not seem to correlate with the students' perceived importance of proofreading. The lack of time dedicated to proofreading could be for a number of reasons. Interestingly, Figure 6 suggests that some students would like to be "forced" to use all of the time available to them to proofread their work. As is often the case, during the first writing assessment given to participants the students were given a degree of freedom in terms of how they organised the time available to them. If there were students who thought they had finished writing and proofreading their work, they were allowed to spend the remainder of the lesson reading. It seems that for some students, the temptation to rush through their writing and proofreading in order to resume a more favourable task outweighs their desire to check the accuracy of their work. As a trainee teacher this was an important lesson to learn, and will certainly have an impact on my practice in the future. Assuming that students have the maturity and time management skills to decide when a task is complete is perhaps unwise; though we must equip students with independence as outlined by Yancey (1998), it could be argued that in leaving students to make executive

decisions about the amount of time they dedicate to tasks we actually do them a disservice. I will henceforth design written tasks that are prescriptive so far as time management is concerned to ensure that students produce work that is to the best of their ability.

So far as students' confidence with proofreading is concerned, Figure 5 shows that none of the participants felt extremely confident about proofreading prior to intervention. This lack of confidence seems to support Madraso's (1993) assertion that students are rarely taught how to proofread; it seems unlikely that students would feel overtly confident about a skill they had never been taught. However, considering the majority of students (14) rated their confidence with proofreading as being exactly halfway between no confidence and complete confidence, Carduner's (2007) suggestion that teachers do at least attempt to teach proofreading seems more valid.

So what is it that students find hard about proofreading? As Figure 4 demonstrates, proofread creates a vast array of difficulties for students, including maintaining focus in order to find mistakes. Spotting spelling errors was the second highest scorer in terms of difficulties students found in proofreading pre-intervention, with a total of 7 students identifying it as a challenge. As the table in Figure 1 shows, the most common errors in students' work prior to intervention were misspellings. This is, to a certain extent, to be expected. There are a number of rules to be learnt in terms of grammar, punctuation, and capitalisation, albeit with a few exceptions to said rules. To put that into perspective, Phil Beadle (2015) estimates that to learn the spellings of all the words in the English language would take around 16,000 years. There are,

of course, certain strategies that can be implemented to help students to improve their spelling without simply learning individual words. What is not possible, however, is to predict the vocabulary that one will want to employ in a piece of writing and thus learn key words in advance, particularly when the subject matter or focus of the writing is unknown prior to commencing. It is perhaps for this reason that the lowest decrease in the number of errors was seen in spellings (Figure 8). Although the decrease was lower than in other areas, there was still a decrease.

The final question we must address is the most important, and concerns the strategies teachers can employ to help student develop their proofreading skills. The results in Figure 6 show the methods suggested by students to improve their proofreading. The two most common suggestions were simply to practise proofreading and to receive teacher instruction on SPaG, with 10 and 8 suggestions respectively. Based on these suggestions, I devised a number of exercises to enable students to practise a number of the aforementioned strategies. I also devised a lesson to recap a number of common grammar, capitalisation, and punctuation errors. These interventions clearly made a difference looking at the results seen in Figure 8. The number of errors in every category decreased following the intervention. These figures challenge Carduner's (2007) assertion that students fail to apply their grammatical knowledge in writing tasks. Furthermore, it supports the research undertaken by Dockrell, Marshall and Wyse (2016) that highlights the significant impact direct instruction has on students' writing ability. As an NQT, I will therefore continue to teach grammar in isolation safe in the knowledge that it will have a positive, tangible impact on students' writing rather than being relegated to the depths of their memories when it comes to implementation. I will also teach

students the aforementioned proofreading strategies, giving them the autonomy to employ whichever of these strategies they find most fruitful.

Conclusion

In regards to my research questions, I have found that students do not proofread because it is not something that they are taught how to do as standard. If nothing else, this research project has demonstrated the importance of teaching students how to proofread, recognising it as a separate and teachable skill rather than as a trick which is automatically and somewhat magically developed as part of the process of learning how to write. In addition, I have found that there are a number of ways in which we as teachers can help students to proofread. Whilst these have been discussed above in greater detail, ensuring students use all available time for proofreading and giving them the opportunity to practise a number of proofreading strategies prior to implementation are key.

So far as recommendations for the school are concerned I would advise that all staff attend a short training session on proofreading; the session would ensure that all staff understood the importance and benefits of building in lesson time for guided proofreading. No matter the subject discipline, every teacher is inarguably an English teacher and must therefore take some degree of responsibility in developing students' literacy. It is futile for an English teacher to correct errors in a student's comparative poetry essay if the same errors go unchecked in a Biology essay. This consistency of expectation will be key in helping students to improve their technical accuracy. As an NQT, I will ensure I act upon this research through continuing to build proofreading instruction and practice into English lessons at KS3. This

instruction will sit alongside the teaching of common SPaG errors to ensure students are equipped with the necessary tools to produce technically accurate writing.

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