Useful Resources for Editing Academic Writing in English

By Susan Tennant (Japan)

Age as a Factor Determining Income Inequality in Sri Lanka
- The Initials Talk: The Hidden Order in Mukherjee's The Holder of the World
- Cross-Cultural Organ Solicitation: A Comparison of Japanese and U.S. Donor-

Recruiting Campaigns
- The Aftermath of Ethnic Violence—Post War Reconstruction in the Southern

Philippines: A Preliminary Assessment of the Role of the International Community
- Estimates of the Elasticities of Substitution between Imported and Domestically

Produced Commodities in Indonesian Manufacturing Sectors

These are just a few of the titles of articles, theses, and dissertations written by graduate students at the Graduate School of International Development (GSID) of Nagoya University in Japan, where I work assisting students for whom English is a second or additional language. The students are from Japan and other Asian countries, Africa, South America, and Europe. Many of them are mature students returning for graduate study after working in their home countries as civil servants, professors, bankers, or lawyers, or in other professions. Many of the foreign students are recipients of Japanese government scholarships; others receive financial support from their own governments.

These graduate students are highly motivated, hard working, and disciplined, and they dream of changing their own countries and improving the world. Since completing a thesis or dissertation is essential for graduation, and publishing in an international journal may further their careers, writing well in English is of great importance to them. Their ability and enthusiasm can be gauged by the fact that in addition to the many articles they have published in the GSID journal Forum of International Development Studies, some succeed in publishing their articles in other English language journals in Japan and other countries.

Without encyclopedic knowledge, however, how can an English teacher assist these students writing across such a wide range of topics? How can a teacher understand the background of their research sufficiently to make helpful corrections and suggestions? How can an English teacher use unfamiliar technical terms accurately or spell or capitalize words she has never before encountered? How can a teacher decide whether a subject-specific noun should be singular or plural? Which documentation style should be recommended to a student preparing an academic manuscript?

This article first describes how I assist these graduate students with their academic writing in English. Then I will explain several readily available resources that are useful for teachers in

non-English-speaking countries who are responsible for correcting academic theses and dissertations, professional articles, and papers for international conferences.

Editing academic writing

Some of the students who come to us for assistance are sent by advisors and professors, but most come of their own accord. Students requesting help submit a printed, double-spaced copy of their work, which can vary from a one-page abstract to a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation of several hundred pages. I am not responsible for giving grades or evaluating the writing. In addition, because I do not usually reread a paper after a student has corrected it, it is entirely the student's decision whether or not to incorporate my suggestions. The removal of evaluation from my role is liberating; I can concentrate on helping students express themselves clearly in written English.

I edit using a combination of two methods. First, and most familiar to teachers, I write corrections on the paper, using a red pen to make them clearly visible. In the second and more effective method, I write lengthy comments explaining grammar points, raising questions concerning meaning and logical development, suggesting alternative wording, and reorganizing text. I write numbers on the student's paper and type my detailed commentary with corresponding numbers. Students vary in their language ability, but a 20-page paper will typically elicit 5 pages of feedback. This combination method is modeled on that used by journal or publishing house editors; it treats the student writers as professionals, as most of them are in their home countries.

Editing academic writing is time-consuming work, but the results are rewarding because I catch students at a "teachable moment." For example, I can remind them of a previously studied grammar rule and explain its applicability in a specific instance. In this way, the students often achieve a new understanding of English and are able to incorporate half-remembered rules into a more meaningful framework. For both the students and me, this process works well. Whenever they return with new articles and papers to be corrected, I often find that they have learned from my previous comments and their writing has improved. One student writer told me, "You note the problem, tell us why there is a problem, and then propose a solution. All students value this type of editing."

Online resources

There are a number of online and print resources available to editors. Here are several that have been most helpful in my work.

http://www.MetaCrawler.com

This comprehensive search tool, which uses 15 search services and returns a single configured screen of results, can be invaluable for correcting student writing. There are many uses for this information-accessing tool.

Questions of tense can often be resolved by referring to this Web site. For example, Thai and Indonesian students frequently have trouble with English verb tenses because they lack them in

their native language. Using this tool, the Internet can be searched to determine the order of events about which a student is writing and thus to decide, for example, whether the past perfect or simple past is the appropriate choice of tense.

For resolving questions of singular and plural, the Internet is extremely useful. What is an EPZ in Vietnam and how many of them are there? Through the Internet the meaning can be found—export processing zone—as well as the fact that there is only one in Vietnam. Such information is needed to resolve a number of article and verb problems.

Should North Western Province in Sri Lanka be capitalized in that manner? The Internet provides the information that this is indeed the name of the province, not simply a description of its location. Hence, the capitalization is correct.

This search tool is also helpful for highly technical papers. What is the Pigou-Dalton theory in economics and how can it be written about clearly? By referring to the Internet, a teacher can understand the general idea of the theory enabling her to correct a student's writing more easily. What is chaos theory, which a student uses to describe the writing of the novelist Mukherjee? Without an elementary understanding of chaos theory, as is available through a MetaCrawler search, it may be impossible to understand such writing and correct it with confidence. Students sometimes use Latin phrases in academic writing. The accuracy of these can also be checked by accessing the Internet through MetaCrawler.

http://www.m-w.com

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary is often more useful than a desktop dictionary because the information obtained can quickly be copied and pasted into notes to students. Copying the meanings of *intense* and *extensive* for a student who writes, "See the *Review of Income and Wealth* for intense literature on this subject," can lead him to see that *extensive* is the word needed.

The online dictionary is also useful for a teacher who needs a quick check of the meaning of unfamiliar words such as *homologation*; words of which one is uncertain, such as *tendentiously*; or words that a student has used incorrectly, such as *concord* used as a verb. In addition, English speakers seldom or never use certain cognate words that are commonly used in other countries with Latin-based languages; for example, in English, *celerity* is now archaic or literary. This important information needs to be given to a student in addition to suggesting a change to *speed* or *rapidity*.

Print resources

A thesaurus is a well-known aid for writers. A thesaurus, in addition to being valuable for suggesting a more appropriate word, is a useful tool for a teacher in determining the intended meaning if a student has mistranslated a word into English. For example, the collocation *dissolved feelings* is not possible in English, but the Oxford thesaurus lists *diffuse* or *sublimated* as synonyms for *dissolved*; either one is appropriate for use with *feelings*. In addition to consulting a desktop thesaurus, a teacher can access an electronic version through the Internet.

Students writing in English are often confused about documentation style. In Japan, documentation style is not an important issue, but it quickly becomes one for students hoping to publish in an international journal. Such students should, of course, look in the journal's rules for contributors to determine the accepted style. However, for others who are undecided about where they will ultimately seek to publish, *The Chicago Manual of Style* is a straightforward and reliable source of information. Some sections of this book are also available through the Internet. There is a link at http://www.press.uchicago.edu. Also, an Internet search of the title *The Chicago Manual of Style* will give Web sites of various libraries that provide information and examples of Chicago style.

Conclusion

Academic writing is difficult for nonnative speakers of English, even though they may be students of high ability and strong motivation. For such students, it is helpful for teachers to move beyond simple correction to providing explanations for changes suggested. For this purpose, and for their own edification, those editing academic writing will find the resources listed above useful. In particular, English teachers living in countries where English language reference books are difficult to obtain will find Internet resources extremely valuable.

Reference

The Chicago Manual of Style. 1993. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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