

Writing Support in Higher Education: Why Native Checking Services Do Not Help Improve the Quality of Research Writing

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<Abstract>

Writing a research paper poses the dual requirement of constructing a convincing argument and expressing it in a manner that can be grasped by the reader. This requirement becomes even more challenging when writing in a foreign language. In Japan, as the number of international students continues to grow, many graduate schools offer a type of copy editing service to authors writing in non-native languages (mainly English or Japanese). This service, often called a “native check,” aims to help authors revise issues with grammar and expression that are frequently found in non-native writing. This service is thought to produce a research paper that expresses the author’s argument fluently. In this light, the present paper will examine the utility of native checking in research writing by closely analyzing an example of this service in practice. This analysis will demonstrate that, in the end, native checking does not help improve research writing. Although native checking can help authors produce writing that is more natural, it cannot help them satisfy the above two requirements of quality research writing since the second requirement (a clearly expressed argument) is dependent on the first (the presence of a convincing argument), and native checking provides no mechanism to ensure a convincing argument. Thus, ultimately native checking does not help produce writing that is convincing.

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1. Introduction

In response to the declining domestic student population, Japanese universities have recently been attempting to draw an increasing number of international students. These schools are facing stiff competition from universities in other countries, such as nearby China (Clavel 2014). One way Japanese universities, especially graduate schools, can attract more international students is by promising to provide the support needed to publish research. Since these students are coming from abroad, part of this support means accommodating those writing their research in non-native languages – usually either English or Japanese. To help these students produce quality work, many universities offer a type of copy editing service or funding for that service to authors writing in a foreign language. This service is called a “native check.”

Native checking is a term primarily used by language service providers to refer to proofreading done by a native speaker of a language on a text translated by a non-native speaker (“Eigo neitibu chekku,” n.d.). However, it is common practice for Japanese universities to use the term to refer to corrections made to original texts written by a non-native speaker (Willey and Tanimoto 2010). The purpose of a native check is similar to the practice of copy editing where editors correct errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, style, and usage to ensure that “the author’s raw text...is easy to read so that readers can grasp his or her ideas” (SFEP, n.d.). The overall goal of editing is to make the text “say what it means, and mean what it says” (Lyons and Doueck 2010). Native checking encompasses similar aims, including the correction of grammar and style for the purposes of making the author’s ideas readily understood. But native checking implies the revision of errors in style and expression frequently made by non-native speakers, such as the use of false friends. For graduate students producing original research, native checking is a way to help authors revise issues with grammar and expression, so that the language of the final paper is fluent. While native checking is sometimes used as personalized feedback for improving the overall writing skills of students studying English as a foreign language, these checks are also used to

polish research manuscripts being prepared for publication.

While copy editing is important to any text written for publication, native checking services, as this paper will demonstrate, provide little value to graduate students writing research papers, as they do not make a text “mean what it says, and say what it means.” The reason native checking fails at this is that it does not help the students express their argument – the foremost requirement of quality research writing.

Writing a research paper poses the dual challenge of constructing a convincing argument and expressing it in a manner that an educated reader can understand. The paper must accurately communicate a thesis and the logical support for that thesis. Thus, any writing support intended to improve the quality of a research paper must improve the clarity of the thesis and its support. Anything that fails to contribute to this clarity is unhelpful.

When applied to research writing, native checking services should help authors produce a final draft that is not only free of grammar and expression errors, but that also successfully communicates the paper’s thesis and support. However, the present paper contends that native checking does not contribute to the clarity of argumentation and therefore does not improve the paper’s quality. Native checking cannot improve the first requirement of a quality research paper (providing a conclusion and logical support), since it cannot supply the elements of argumentation (premises and conclusion) nor the logical connections between premises and conclusion. If native checking cannot improve the first requirement of quality research, then it cannot improve on the second requirement (clarity), since the second depends on the first.

This paper demonstrates the limited utility of native checking by closely analyzing an example of native checking in practice. This analysis will demonstrate how native checking helps authors produce writing that fulfills the language expectations of research writing while failing to ensure clarity of argumentation. Thus, ultimately native checking does not produce writing that is convincing.

2. Native Checking and the Elements of Argumentation

Like proofreading, native checking is done at a sentence level. A native checker's first goal is to look over the text sentence by sentence and seek out grammar errors or inappropriate usage arising primarily from linguistic interference from the author's first language. Then, by interpreting the author's intentions, a native checker can offer suggestions for revisions that improve language fluency. The final goal of a native check is revisions that are free of errors and are fluent. It is assumed that this sort of writing support helps improve the quality of the paper.

Although it is true that native checking can help authors produce writing that is more fluent, it cannot help them communicate a convincing argument. The reason for this is that native checking works within the boundaries of language: it helps the author smooth over poorly expressed ideas and make connections between words and sentences. It does not, however, help produce the elements of argumentation (premises and conclusion) nor does it help make logical connections between those elements.

Looking at an example of native checking in action can help illustrate this point. The passage below is a sample taken from an abstract of a paper on informal employment in China.

Given some undesirable characteristics of informal employment, are these workers voluntary or forced to engage in informal employment? In China, there is still no empirical research in this area, the purpose of this study is to close this gap in the empirical literature to provide evidence for policy makers that which part of the informal workers should the government policy support and help. Our results show that the two-component informal employment model describes our data best, both groups of informal employment are considerable in size, making up 28.8% (Informal-1) and 37.6% (Informal-2) of the whole labor market, or 43.4% and 56.6% of the informal labor market, respectively. Nearly 80% of the informal workers are voluntarily engaged in informal employment; only 22.74% are forced to enter informal labor market, and informal labor market is not a low-end market without enter barriers.

Several language errors are found in this passage. The opening of the first sentence in the passage, “Given some undesirable characteristics of informal employment...,” is an awkward expression that should be reworded. Clearly it is intended to mean *given that some undesirable characteristics of informal employment exist*, so a possible revision could look like this: The fact that informal employment has some undesirable characteristics...” The error possibly arises from a misunderstanding of the function of the expression “given,” a mistake not uncommon in non-native speakers of English. Thus, a native checker who is well-versed in interference issues can easily recognize the irregularity and provide revisions that improve fluency. Similar errors can be found throughout the passage. But given the trivialness of these errors, the passage can be revised for language fluency quite readily. A revised version of the entire passage is shown below on the right (original on the left) with revisions underlined:

Given some undesirable characteristics of informal employment, are these workers voluntary or forced to engage in informal employment? In China, there is still no empirical research in this area, the purpose of this study is to close this gap in the empirical literature to provide evidence for policy makers that which part of the informal workers should the government policy support and help. Our results show that the two-component informal employment model describes our data best, both groups of informal employment are considerable in size, making up 28.8% (Informal-1) and 37.6% (Informal-2) of the whole labor

The fact that informal employment has some undesirable characteristics raises the question: are these workers voluntary or forced to engage in informal employment? In China, there is still no empirical research in this area. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to close this gap in the empirical literature to provide guidelines for policy makers about which part of the informal workers should be supported. Our results show that the two-component informal employment model describes our data best, and that both groups of informal employment are considerable in size, making up 28.8% (Informal-1) and 37.6% (Informal-2) of the whole

market, or 43.4% and 56.6% of the informal labor market, respectively. Nearly 80% of the informal workers are voluntarily engaged in informal employment; only 22.74% are forced to enter informal labor market, and informal labor market is not a low-end market without enter barriers.

labor market, or 43.4% and 56.6% of the informal labor market, respectively. Nearly 80% of the informal workers are voluntarily engaged in informal employment, while only 22.74% are forced to enter the informal labor market. Moreover, the informal labor market is not a low-end market, and it does have entry barriers.

As we can see from the revised version, few repairs need to be made to improve the fluency of the original. Nevertheless, something is clearly still lacking. What is this paper trying to prove? The abstract appears to provide a research objective and findings, but it offers no clear thesis statement or argumentation to tie these elements together.

The research objective seems to be stated in the second sentence (original version), but upon closer examination, we see that while the original and its revision take on the form of a statement of research objectives, they both fail to actually convey those objectives. In fact, what is given instead of the actual research objectives is a formulaic tautology about closing a gap that exists in previous research, which essentially states that the purpose of the research is to perform a study that has not been done yet. The use of formulaic statement of goals echoes the problem of, what could be called, “formal plagiarism,” in which an author replicates grammatical forms from previously published writing without regard to their place in the paper’s overall argument (Lai and Nilep 2014). In formal plagiarism, the writing can be fluent, while the content remains minimal. This is the problem we have in this passage. Having utilized a formulaic grammatical structure (“The purpose of this study is to close the gap in...”), the author has produced a perfectly acceptable sentence. The problem is that even after the original sentences have been pushed through the native checking filter and the errors are corrected, the issue still remains: the purpose of the study is inexplicit.

More importantly, a precise thesis statement is missing. The final two sentences state the findings of an experiment conducted for this research, but what they are trying to prove is unclear. The second to last sentence (“Our results show that the two-component informal employment model describes our data best...”) muddies the waters. Is this the thesis statement? Is it a premise to the thesis? If the latter, how does it support the thesis? According to the last sentence in the passage, the author has apparently determined what percentage of informal workers is voluntary and what percentage is involuntary. We can speculate that the author intends to use this last sentence as the thesis of the paper, i.e., that informal employment is largely voluntary; and that thesis could, in turn, explain the research goal – to determine how much informal work is voluntary.

However, this is research writing, and therefore there cannot be a range of interpretations in the abstract’s statement of research purpose. The above interpretation would need to be verified with the author. And such verification removes this activity from the realm of native checking, as the product becomes no longer a matter of grammar and expression, but instead a matter of argumentation. Consider the difference in the questions we would ask the author if given the chance. When doing a native check, we would ask the question, “Is this what you want to say?” On the other hand, if trying to determine the purpose of the research, we would ask, “Is this your research goal?” These are two very different types of questions. The former asks to verify an interpretation (among other possible interpretations), while the latter asks to verify a fact (about the objective of the study).

The passage above illustrates one of the limitations of native checking. Even if it makes language in a text fluent or natural, it still cannot help make the paper’s thesis clearer. If the thesis statement is missing or muddled among the research findings, as is the case here, the native checker is helpless to improve the clarity of the content. No language revision can correct for this lack of content, as the model revision above demonstrates. What can a native checker do? She can note the run-on sentence, the misuse of “that,” and the needless repetition, but her

interpretation of the author's intentions can only go as far as the sentence level, since the purpose of native checking is to find problems in grammar and expressions, not to replace the content or fill it in with educated guesses.

3. Why the Gap between Language Guidance and Argumentation Guidance is Unbridgeable

So far we have seen one of the limitations of native checking: it cannot deliver a thesis statement. Another limitation of native checking is that it cannot provide logical connections between the thesis and its support even when they are both present in the original document. Native checking can only provide the linguistic cues for connections. At first glance, the addition of connection words, like "therefore," "however," or "moreover," seems valuable as it helps the writing become more fluent, allowing the reader to follow the flow of the argumentation better; however, this fluency is actually potentially dangerous as it masks over deficiencies in the argumentation.

We might assume that providing the connection words between sentences could improve the quality of research writing since it helps make the logical flow of the passage transparent. But when a native checker tries to improve fluency by adding connection words, two problems arise: first, the native checker will invariably need to make assumptions about what logical connections the author intends to make, and some of those assumptions will not be warranted; second, even if a native checker recommends connection words that match the author's intentions, the underlying logical connection between the ideas may remain fallacious.

An example of the former problem is found in the last sentence of the sample passage. Here it is again with the revised version on the right.

Nearly 80% of the informal workers are voluntarily engaged in informal employment; only 22.74% are forced to enter informal labor market, and informal labor market is not a low-end market without enter barriers.

Nearly 80% of the informal workers are voluntarily engaged in informal employment, while only 22.74% are forced to enter the informal labor market. Moreover, the informal labor market is not a low-end market, and it does have entry barriers.

Looking at the original, we see a list of four findings resulting from the author's study: 1) nearly 80% of informal workers are voluntary, 2) 22.74% are involuntary, 3) the informal labor market is a low-end market, and 4) the informal labor market has entry barriers. If there are any connections between these findings, they are left inexplicit.

Ostensibly, a native checker could provide connection words to help draw connections between the findings. In the revised version above, a variety of connection words ("while", "moreover", and "and") have been added to boost fluency. The first addition ("while") appears to be a reasonable choice. It is likely that the author intends to contrast the two percentages: one is high, the other is comparatively low, and they both conveniently add up to roughly one hundred percent. Thus, using a contrast connecting word like "while" seems like a safe choice.

Conversely, the next two additions ("moreover" and "and") may or may not appropriately communicate the author's intentions. This is because the author may or may not be intending to draw a logical connection between the first two findings and the last two findings. It is possible that these are intended to be discrete "laundry list" of findings with no underlying connection and that the sentence constitutes a non-argument (Kabara 2013). Indeed, in the revision above, the native checker assumes that the last two items are just two incidental findings drawn from the same study and opts for simple conjunctions ("moreover" and "and") to convey this. Thus, even the revised sentence amounts to a non-argument.

On the other hand, it is also possible that the author intends for the first two findings to serve as support for the last two findings. In other words, the author wants to say that the fact that most of the workers enter the

informal labor market voluntarily is proof that the market is not low-end and that it does have entry barriers. This would mean that the first two findings constitute a premise (most workers enter the market voluntarily), and the latter two are conclusions drawn from that premise. If that is the case, the simple conjunctions are not appropriate as they do not imply a premise-conclusion relationship. If the author intends to provide a premise and its conclusion in this statement, a revision would require a different sort of connection word. In research writing, the connection between premise and conclusion should be made explicit so that reader need not make any assumptions.

Presumably, this problem could easily be rectified. The revision of this sentence could have been this: “Nearly 80% of the informal workers are voluntarily engaged in informal employment, while only 22.74% are forced to enter the informal labor market. Therefore, the informal labor market is not a low-end market...” But simply replacing the word “moreover” with “therefore” would not resolve the underlying problem of establishing an actual logical connection between the two findings. The above revision still fails to explain why the fact that most informal workers enter the market voluntarily serves as evidence that it is not a low-end market; moreover, it fails to provide the necessary logical steps that eliminate the possibility that the informal labor market is a low-end market despite the large percentage of voluntary workers. Thus, despite appearances, the addition of “therefore” does not provide any logical connection between ideas; it merely cues to the reader to a logical connection that is supposed to exist. Although it is tempting to assume that the addition of such cueing words as “therefore” helps make the logical flow of the argumentation more transparent, so that a charitable reader could make the connection by herself, but this is a dangerous assumption.

Consider a simpler example involving a student speaking to a teacher: *My computer broke this morning. So, I couldn't finish my assignment for class today.* The connection word “so” makes the statement fluent by making the intended cause-effect relationship transparent. Nevertheless, the reasoning behind this relationship remains fallacious. The fact that the student's computer broke does not necessarily infer that she could not

finish her assignment on time. This becomes obvious when we consider the possible actions she could have taken to finish her assignment: she could have completed the assignment the old-fashioned way – with pen and paper; she could have borrowed somebody else’s computer; she could have had her computer repaired well before class begun so that she had enough time to finish the assignment, etc. In order to make her case convincing, she needs to eliminate the above possibilities by adding several premises. Specifically, the student needs to state that her computer broke, the assignment had to be done on a computer, she could not use another computer, and the computer could not be repaired in time. These premises eliminate reasonable alternative possibilities and show us that the student could not finish her assignment as required. It is the addition of explicit premises that help make her conclusion convincing (Lai 2010).

It is true that in everyday interactions, we do not lay out each premise explicitly as shown above. Listeners/readers routinely fill in the gaps for speakers/writers with assumptions based on shared contextual understanding. We all know that some assignments must be done on a computer, borrowing a computer is a major request, and a computer repair shop that can fix a broken machine within a few hours would be a rare find indeed. So, we allow the speakers/writers to omit necessary premises; and we volunteer those premises based on shared understanding and trust. Filling in the logical gaps like this is acceptable, even necessary, in daily interactions. We rely on this gap-filling to lubricate communication. Without it, communication would quickly become tedious and may even come to a halt.

With research writing, on the other hand, the author cannot ask the reader to fill in the gaps with assumptions. The reasons for this are that filling in the assumptions for a speaker or author could inadvertently mask over poor reasoning, and the author is not in a position to know what gaps in reasoning the reader can or cannot fill.

Returning to the informal labor market problem, we can see how readers filling in the gaps can mask over poor reasoning. Is it truly safe to assume the fact that most informal workers enter the market voluntarily (80 percent) actually eliminates the possibility that the informal labor

market is a low-end market? This could be the case, since the fact that many workers enter the market voluntarily could mean that it has a higher status than markets where workers enter involuntarily. But, “could be the case” is far from convincing, and this assumption cannot simply be granted from thin air – at least, not in a formal research paper.

It may also be tempting to assume that specialized knowledge in a research field can be used to fill in inexplicit connections between premises and conclusions. It is possible that an expert in labor market economics could use prior knowledge about labor market tendencies to fill in the missing premises for the author. And perhaps, just as in the above example with the student and the broken computer, explaining the logical relation between every element in a research project could become tedious and needlessly increase the paper’s word count. But, just as in the computer problem, it could also be masking over insufficient reasoning. Part of filling in the premises in daily interaction is shared knowledge (we all know what an inconvenience a broken computer is; and an expert in labor economics knows what market tendencies are like), but the other part is about trusting the speaker/author can, if pressed, eliminate alternative possibilities. We do not know who the reader is. So, we can never be sure what knowledge they share with the author. Even if we expect the readers to be experts in the research field, we can overestimate the overlap in knowledge between the author and reader. Cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker notes how routinely baffled he is by research articles in his own field. He recounts reading an article that states, “The slow and integrative nature of conscious perception is confirmed behaviorally by observations such as the ‘rabbit illusion’...” and finding himself frustrated that “the authors write as if everyone knows what the rabbit illusion is, but I’ve been in this business for nearly forty years and had never heard of it” (Pinker 2014). The authors cannot rely on research peers with specialized knowledge to fill in unstated premises. Moreover, if the audience is broadened beyond specialists, the dangers of relying on readers to supply premises to an argument become even more pronounced. Thus, relying on any reader, even an expert in the field, to make assumptions and fill in the logical gaps is precarious. The author needs to

explicitly state the premises necessary for the paper's conclusion.

A native checker does not have the ability to ensure that the necessary premises are stated explicitly. The native checking helps connect words and sentences and the elements of language, but it cannot bridge the gap between one idea and another. There is no mechanism in the native checking process that can guarantee the connections between ideas are logical, because native checking works only with the rules of language. The rules of language are not the same as the rules of reasoning. In summary, native checking can help ensure the appearance of a connection between sentences with connection words, but it cannot ensure an actual connection between the ideas the sentences represent.

4. Conclusion

Native checking cannot improve the quality of research writing. The entire point of a research paper is to put forth a thesis statement supported by a convincing argument that can be readily understood, and native checking does not provide this. What native checking does provide is greater fluency, and it is tempting to assume that this helps lubricate communication. However, this fluency assurance cannot deliver any elements of an argument nor the logical connections between those elements. In fact, this fluency assurance can have the unfortunate effect of masking over flawed argumentation as we have seen in section three.

This is concerning because native checking is seen as an essential step in polishing research writing in Japan, where a growing number of international students are aiming to publish in a foreign language. The native check is thought to be a way to ensure the requirements of a quality research paper are met. In actuality, it does little but provide feedback on their language skills, without making their argument convincing.

It may be necessary for universities to search for alternative options to aid graduate students' research writing. As Pinker states, "If you try to repair an incoherent text and find that no placement of *therefores* and *moreovers* and *howevers* will hold it together, that is a sign that the underlying argument may be incoherent too" (2014). It may be beneficial to

focus on what could be called “argumentation checks” as a primary means of supporting research writing. Only after the author has made her argument convincing does a language check make sense.

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高等教育での論文作成支援

－ネイティブチェックサービスが研究論文の
質を改善する助けにはならない理由－

トーマス・カバラ*
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＜要 旨＞

日本では、年々大学院の留学生が増加するにつれ、外国語で研究論文を執筆する大学院生が多くなっている。そのため、主に英語や日本語のネイティブチェックサービスを提供する大学院も多い。本研究は、このサービスが質の高い論文作成において実際に役立つか否かを再検討する。

研究論文を書く場合、説得力のある主張とそれを理解しやすい形で表現するという二つの要求がある。ネイティブチェックは不自然な表現や文法の誤りを訂正することで理解しやすい主張のある論文を生み出すことができると考えられている。しかし、自然な表現と理解しやすい主張は別物であり、また、理解しやすい主張は説得力のある主張に依存しているため、ネイティブチェックが説得力のある主張を保証する仕組みを持たない。最終的に、上記にある二つの要求を満たすことが無く、説得力のある論文を完成させる一因とならないのである。

本研究は、大学院で行われるネイティブチェックの実例を厳密に分析し、それによって、説得力のある論文を完成させる上でネイティブチェックは二つの要求を満たさず、研究論文の質向上にならないことを論証していく。

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