Which Grammatical Errors Do First-Year University Students Make and Do Those Errors Matter? A Focusing Inquiry

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MICHAEL COP
HUNTER HATFIELD
Department of English and Linguistics
University of Otago

ABSTRACT

Inspired by the 'teaching as inquiry' model, we initiated a focusing inquiry on 2,811 English diagnostic tests that were taken in 2014-2015 by first-year students entering the Health Sciences programme at the University of Otago, a programme for aspiring health professionals. That inquiry aimed to improve the first-year paper taken by students who failed the diagnostic test. Counting and categorizing types of errors, we found that about 56% of all sentences written by these students in the reading comprehension section of the test had an error in grammar, punctuation, or spelling. The first part of this paper examines these errors. The second part of this paper explores the implications of these errors for those students. Our subsequent research revealed significant relationships between grammatical and stylistic competency and tertiary success. Quite simply, we found that students who committed errors of grammar, punctuation, and spelling were less likely to gain placement in health professional programmes such as Medicine, Dentistry, or Physiotherapy.

INTRODUCTION

Each year, 1200-1500 students in Health Sciences First Year at the University of Otago sit an English diagnostic test before they begin their very first semester of university studies. This diagnostic test is meant to identify students who may need extra English tuition to aid their subsequent studies. That is, students who do not meet a mark of 60% on the first (T1) or second-chance test (T2[1]) are required to enrol in an extra English paper in the second semester of that first year. We initiated a focusing inquiry regarding this test for two purposes: first, to form relevant learning outcomes for students who will take that extra paper; second, to provide information that might be relevant to secondary schools throughout New Zealand, as the students taking this diagnostic form a large sample group of New Zealand's high school graduates.

[1] T2 is held about two months after T1. It is identical in format to T1, but differs in content.

What linguistic conventions do these students display on a test which they know is examining their abilities?

To conduct a focusing inquiry, in the words of the Ministry of Education (2007), we attempted to determine "What is important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where my students are at?" (p. 35). This question seems to have two guiding points. The first guiding point is a question. "What is important…given where my students are at?" provides the impetus of a focusing inquiry. After all, questions prompt answers. Set off by parentheses, the second guiding point, "(and therefore worth spending time on)," could be read as a taken-as-granted statement. While we could easily answer "What is important…given where my students are at?" by quantitatively analysing the data from the extant tests, we equally needed to consider if our students' gaps in grammatical knowledge were "therefore worth spending time on." Which skills in English grammar and style (e.g. sentence construction, punctuation, and standardised spelling) do our students, the graduates of New Zealand high schools, possess, and do those skills relate to their larger life goals?

The question and parenthetical statement from the Ministry of Education's key question for focusing inquiry structure this paper. The first section quantitatively addresses the question "What is important…given where my students are at?" We start by identifying the grammatical errors committed by our students on the reading comprehension section of the diagnostic test.[2] This section is data-heavy, and some readers who do not need to know the precise errors may wish to skim this portion, glancing over the types of errors as listed in the Appendix. Next, we attempt to identify whether these error patterns demonstrate a genuine linguistic deficit or a test-taking deficit. Clearly, a teacher would need to make different interventions depending on why the students are making these errors. This information may be of use to secondary school teachers who focus upon the teaching of these conventions. In the second section of the paper, we study whether the grammatical errors demonstrated by our students have any larger implications. That is, is grammar "therefore worth spending time on" for these students? Does a lack of grammatical skill affect larger life goals?

"WHAT IS IMPORTANT…GIVEN WHERE MY STUDENTS ARE AT?"

In order to analyse our data effectively and to provide New Zealand-specific data, we first needed to understand the composition of our 2014-2015 student test-taking population. How many of the tests in our data set come from students who speak English as a first language and who have participated in some sort of New Zealand high school qualification? Of the students who sat the test either once or twice, 95% were domestic students, with 89% of the total test-taking population identifying English as their first language (L1). Further, of the domestic L1 students, 95% had some New Zealand entrance qualification, (85% NCEA 3 qualification; the other 10% consisting of the Cambridge

[2] In the interest of brevity for this paper, we include *spelling* and *punctuation* in the term *grammatical*.

International Exam, International Baccalaureate, NCEA 2, NCEA 1, and various older qualifications). For this article, our research focuses on New Zealand domestic English L1 students, leaving us with 2811 tests to analyse[3]. Approximately 19% of L1 English domestic students do not achieve a passing score on T1 or T2. The ones who do not pass T2 make up part of the cohort of the additional English paper, along with English as a second language (L2) students who do not pass and other enrolees.

As to their grammatical errors, the question of "where my students are at" initially arose from differences in mean grades between the reading comprehension (RC) and the listening comprehension (LC) sections of the diagnostic. The RC and LC have very similar structures (five questions each worth 2 marks) and time constraints (both sections take about 10 minutes), but students from 2010 to 2015 were on average achieving much lower marks on the RC than on the LC (5.2/10[4] and 8.6/10 respectively)[5]. We hypothesised that part of this difference might arise from stylistic restrictions for the RC that are not applied to the LC. The RC requires students to respond with complete sentences whereas the LC permits students to respond in bullet or point form. The rationale behind the instruction to write complete sentences on the RC is twofold. First, the stylistic restriction tested if students could produce the formal writing often required by a tertiary academic discourse community. Second, the stylistic restriction also tested whether or not students could follow instructions. When it was first noticed that students were struggling to produce grammatically correct sentences on the RC (2013), the instructions were modified to include a basic example of a complete sentence and a rudimentary explanation of that example to guide the students:

A <u>complete sentence</u> starts with a <u>capital letter</u>, ends with a <u>full-stop</u>, and includes a clear <u>subject</u> and <u>verb</u>.

e.g. *The students* <u>wrote</u> complete sentences.
[*subject***]** **[**<u>verb</u>**]**

When we examined T1 and T2 for 2014-2015, we found that grammatical errors indeed contributed to the difference in mark between RC and LC despite these modified instructions. We also discovered a second reason for the difference between RC and LC marks: blank answers.

Across T1 and T2 for 2014-2015, students failed to respond to 1,261 questions on the RC whereas they left 41 responses blank on the LC. These raw counts are better contextualised against the number of opportunities that there are for such an error. There were 2,811 tests with 5 questions per RC and

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[3] The reasons for difficulties with English writing conventions for L2 students can be quite different than those for whom English is a first language; therefore, we leave the second language cohort for another paper.

[4] Note that scoring less than 60% on any one section of the diagnostic does not preclude students from passing the test. Students pass based on cumulative score for all sections.

[5] Note that we have the averages for the sections from 2010-2015 tests, but we only have the physical tests from 2014-2015 (i.e. the reason our detailed data span only these two years). Previous tests were destroyed after being held for one year.

LC, producing a total 14,055 possible responses in each section: 9% of all RC responses were left blank, but only 0.2% of all LC responses were left blank.

Amongst the completed responses, there were also far more grammatical errors on the RC than on the LC (as one might expect because of the grammatical restrictions for the RC). We found a total of 7,215 grammatical errors for the RC where we found only 2,381 grammatical errors for the LC. If we subtract the 1,261 blank RC responses from the 14,055 total possible RC responses (i.e. students cannot make grammatical errors if they have not written anything), there remain 12,914 responses in which there could be a grammatical error. On average, 55.9% of responses had a grammatical error (compared to only 17% for the LC). Because the opportunities for each type of error vary widely, it is difficult to establish a single measure for opportunities to commit errors across all error types. For example, students only rarely make more than one sentence fragment error per question because all RC questions were designed to be answered in a single sentence. Students can, however, commit as many spelling errors per response as there are words in their response.

Table 1 in Appendix A lists the predominant grammatical error types that were discovered in the RC; examples and explanations of these error types can be found in Table 2. This information could be useful for secondary school teachers examining the content and manner of instruction. These error types were collected into broad categories when it became apparent that many error types seemed to be highly connected to the form of a question. For instance, one question on the RC seemed to elicit many sentence fragments composed of bare noun phrases with no main verb; another question seemed to elicit subordinate clauses. That is, the type of sentence fragment was highly dependent upon the question that was asked, so that there is no reason to suspect a particular problem with noun phrases or subordinate clauses in general. Rather, many students do not seem to distinguish between sentence fragments (which are natural in informal speech) and grammatically complete sentences required by the instructions on the test. The broad categories, therefore, simply allow us to ask broader questions like “Do students who make punctuation, spelling, sentence fragment, or other grammatical errors tend to be offered places in Health Sciences professional programmes?”

DO THE ERROR PATTERNS SHOW A DEFICIT IN FORMAL WRITING OR IN TEST-TAKING ABILITIES?

The number of errors presented us with a major question: are these errors evidence of genuine linguistic deficiencies or an artefact of test-taking? The type of intervention or instruction necessary to help students improve would be quite different in the two scenarios. While there is no perfect way to assess if these errors demonstrate linguistic or test-taking difficulties without additional testing, we can look for certain types of evidence. In one approach, we can look at students who achieved a high score on the diagnostic test compared to those who received a low one. Systemic linguistic deficiencies in the population would show as high-scoring students making the same sorts of errors as low-scoring students, but making far fewer of them. Alternatively, a test-taking ability (such as carefully reading instructions about writing a complete sentence) would likely

show in the data as high-performing students scoring better on one specific error—namely the sentence fragment error. If there are such differences amongst types of error made, there is also the possibility that high-performing students have specific areas in which they are on average more proficient. This situation seems unlikely, but remains a possibility.

To examine the error patterns, we calculated the mean reading score for the RC of each test as well as its variance. We then created a low-performing bin that included all of the students who scored more than one standard deviation below the mean on the RC portion of each test (17% of students) and a high-performing bin that included all of the students with a score one standard deviation above the mean (18% of students).

Error Category	**Low-Performing Count (%)**	**High-Performing Count (%)**
Punctuation	620 (32.5)	175 (34.5)
Spelling	365 (19.2)	108 (21.3)
Sentence Fragment	687 (36.0)	144 (28.4)
Other Grammatical	233 (12.2)	80 (15.8)
Total	1905	507

Table 1: Summary of Error Categories for Low-Performing and High-Performing Students Taking the English Diagnostic.

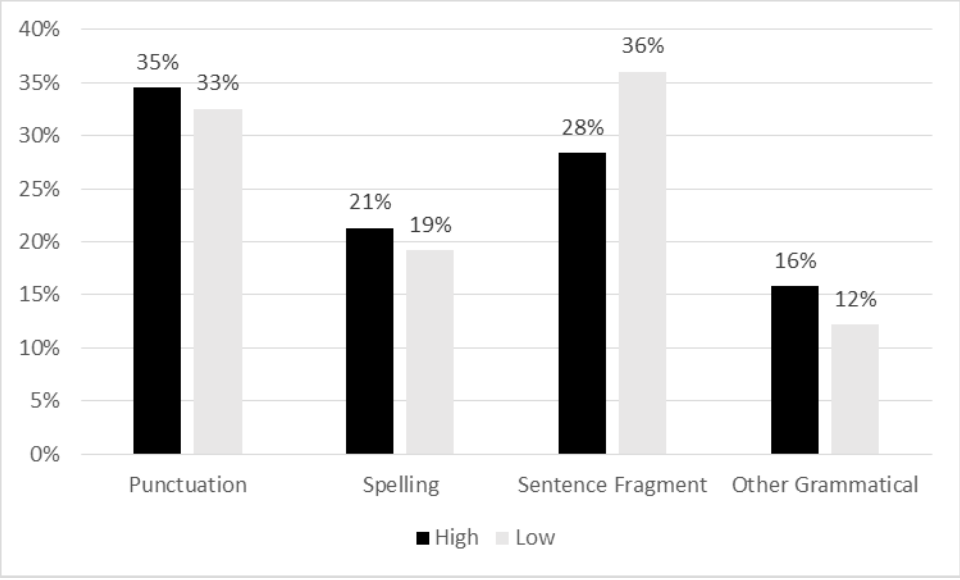

Fig. 1: Error categories by high- and low-performing students

Table 1 reveals that low-performing students, of course, make more errors, but Figure 1 indicates that the percentages of errors do not differ radically between low- and high-performing students. Three of the four error categories are within 4% for both high- and low-performing groups. The one category that does differ by double that percentage (i.e. 8%) is that of sentence fragments. Low-performing students make more sentence fragment errors—not just as a comparative total (687 compared to 144), but also as a percentage of their total errors (36.1% compared to 28.4%). High-performing students seem to

have somewhat greater control of the concept of a complete sentence, making fewer fragment mistakes. The similar percentages of errors between low- and high-performing are also consistent with the notion that generally all students make the same sorts of errors with a mild test-taking effect showing on the fragment errors. Of course, greater linguistic skills may allow some students more readily to understand the instructions, namely that a subject and a verb are required in each response. Equally, punctuation errors (in particular, initial capital and full stop errors) may show that some low-scoring students may simply fail to read the instructions at all (i.e. they lack test-taking skills). Figure 2 shows that low-performing students are more likely to omit both the initial capital and the full stop (i.e. essentially a bullet or point form answer) than are high-performing students. Low-scoring students made 58 of these types of errors where high-scoring students made 3.

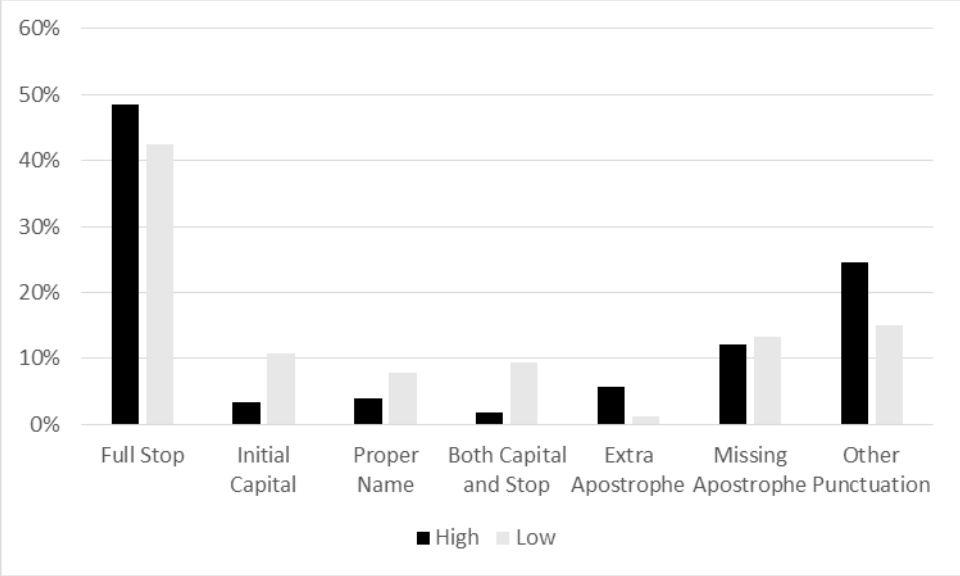

Fig. 2: Punctuation error types by high- and low-performing students

Further, there are some more direct test-taking skills that do not show up in the types of grammatical errors made. Even though the numbers of students in the low- and high-performing groups are similar, the low-performing group left 469 questions blank whereas the high-performing group left only 31. While high-performing students do seem to have a better grasp of grammar, they also seem to have better test-taking skills.

A second way that we can assess whether the errors reflect test-taking ability or reflect a deficit in grammatical knowledge is by focusing on students who sat both T1 and T2. Do their error patterns change between T1 and T2? On the one hand, if their grammatical errors disappear on T2, then they have learned how to take this particular test and the previous errors are not revealing long-term linguistic skills: as there are only two months between T1 an T2, it is less likely that students' improvement relates to change in underlying language use, but rather improvement in taking this particular diagnostic test. On the other hand, if their errors remain in T2, the pattern suggests that a linguistic intervention is needed. In this scenario, the error patterns that we have just seen for low-performing students in general should be very similar to the low-performing group on T2 more specifically.

Error Category	**Test 1** **Count (%)**	**Test 2** **Count (%)**
Punctuation	425 (32.1)	430 (31.7)
Spelling	237 (17.9)	272 (20.0)
Sentence Fragment	428 (32.4)	388 (28.6)
Other Grammatical	233 (17.6)	267 (19.7)
Total	1323	1357

Table 2. Summary of All Errors for Students Who Sat the Test Twice

Table 2 shows that there is no major reduction in grammatical error counts (both absolutely and by percentage) by category between the tests—with the possible exception of sentence fragment errors. The decrease in sentence fragment errors may be attributable to reading instructions more carefully on T2 and then applying those instructions., If, however, sentence fragments errors on T1 were simply a matter of reading the instructions carefully, then we would expect the sentence fragment errors to decrease far more noticeably on T2. They do not. Sitting the test a second time does have more noticeable test-taking benefits, though. Blank answers are reduced by almost two thirds. This reduction of blank answers suggests that students do learn how to take the test to some degree, but that learning does not map over to the grammatical error categories (more than a very slight reduction in sentence fragments). Put simply, our students demonstrate linguistic deficits.

Having argued that the errors documented on this diagnostic test are truly linguistic deficits and not simply testing artefacts, we may then ask whether the errors make any significant difference in our students' lives: are linguistic deficits for our students "therefore worth spending time on"?

GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, AND SPELLING: "(THEREFORE WORTH SPENDING TIME ON)"?

One way to consider the statement "(therefore worth spending time on)" would be to examine how linguistic deficits in grammar, punctuation, and spelling might affect students later in their subsequent professional lives. Any number of sensational news stories of late suggest that grammar, punctuation, and spelling are well worth close attention. For example, *The Guardian* reported a story of hackers who were diverting funds between the New York Federal Reserve Bank and the Bangladesh Bank to entities in Sri Lanka and the Philippines ("Spelling mistake prevented hackers", 2016). The hackers successfully requested four transfers totalling $81 million before the fifth transfer was questioned as suspicious. What was the item that raised suspicion? Acting as a routing bank, the Deutsche Bank noticed that the Sri Lankan NGO to which the money was being transferred was called "Shalika *Fandation*" instead of "Shalika *Foundation*." In this case, spending some time on spelling would have been worth quite a bit to the hackers—an additional $800 million.

As the students who sit our diagnostic test presumably aspire to become health professionals instead of hackers, we might look for more practical, less

sensational, reasons for spending time on grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The effect of communication skills relative to the job market is a relatively good place to look. Communication skills on CVs—particularly for business, marketing, and advertising students—have been well studied. Such studies have historically suggested that communication skills are amongst the most prized by educators, recruiters, and employers. For example, surveying the chief executives of advertising agencies, Gifford and Maggard (1975) asked the question, "When, and if, recruiting college students for future management positions in your advertising agency, what four criteria would you consider most important in the selection process?" (p. 14). "Communication abilities" was the most frequently suggested characteristic. McDowell (1987) surveyed recruiters, teachers, and students about reasons to reject cover letters and résumés. He found that spelling errors, poor grammar, and poor organisation were primary reasons for each group of respondents to reject cover letters: "A further breakdown of these composite results reveals that 100 percent of the teachers, 72 percent of the recruiters, and 36 percent of the students believe that spelling errors, poor grammar, and poor organization are sufficient reasons to reject cover letters" (p. 183). That is, while overall the respondents found such errors to be problematic, students were the least likely to see grammar and spelling errors as problematic.

Charney and Rayman (1989) surveyed how eighteen recruiters rated 72 fictitious résumés for entry-level mechanical engineering positions based on three aspects of writing: sentence style, mechanics (accuracy in grammar, spelling, and punctuation), and elaboration. They found that "résumés containing low-relevance work experience but error-free mechanics were rated *higher* than résumés with highly relevant work experience but faulty mechanics" (p. 47). They also found that "recruiters considered the primary function of a résumé to be demonstrating communication skills" (p. 51). Similarly, Charney, Rayman, and Ferreira-Buckley (1992) replicated the experiment but this time with marketing recruiters (instead of mechanical engineering recruiters) to see if discipline affected the results. Again, the recruiters gave significantly higher ratings to error-free résumés. Kelley and Gaedeke (1990) surveyed employers' perceptions of 34 hiring criteria for entry-level positions for marketing graduates. They found that employers valued oral and written communication as the fourth and fourteenth most important skills of the 34 listed. When those employers were asked the open-ended question "If you had to select a candidate for an entry level marketing or sales position on the basis of only three criteria, which ones would they be?", oral and written communication were the first and fourth most frequently given responses.

Levenburg (1996) questioned if academic faculty and business practitioners share the same points of view on the importance of eighteen general management skills for graduating students. She found that written communication skills were ranked second and eighth in importance by academics and practitioners respectively. Even closer to today, Hopkins, Raymond, and Carlson (2011) confirmed that communication skills are no less important than they seemed to be in previous studies. Written communication skills do seem to have implications for employment seekers for over four decades—at least in these disciplines. How can we gauge effects for our students?

Before our students gain (or even apply for) employment, they need to complete their studies. The most immediate way of gauging language-deficit effects specifically on our students' lives would therefore be to examine the relationship between being offered a place in the Health Sciences professional programmes and making certain types of errors. That is, most students who enter Health Sciences First Year presumably aspire to be health professionals such as doctors, dentists, physiotherapists, and pharmacists. Do the errors made on the diagnostic test actually predict the chance of fulfilling this long-term goal?

In an upcoming article (Cop & Hatfield, Forthcoming), we checked this question by way of a single common error. In our initial research, we noticed that there seemed to be a disproportionate number of possessive apostrophe errors in one RC question from a 2014 test. We found that more students were using possessive apostrophes incorrectly than correctly: of the 312 instances where students chose to use a phrase that required a possessive apostrophe, only 100 possessive apostrophes were used in a prescriptively standard way. Curious to see if such omission had any implications for students, we examined the placement offers for all of the students who responded to this question with sentences that required possessive apostrophes. Those who used the possessive apostrophe correctly had a 43% placement rate into health professional programmes, while those who used it incorrectly had only a 31% placement rate. Students who used the possessive apostrophe correctly were 38% more likely to be offered a place in a health professional programme. As we noted, the relationship between omitting a possessive apostrophe and receiving a place in a health professional programme is unlikely to be causal. Rather, such omission likely ties into some larger feature that does have a substantial effect such as attention to detail or academic preparation.

Error category	**Count for those offered a place (error rate)**	**Count for those *not* offered a place (error rate)**
Punctuation	236 (11.9)	590 (15.8)
Spelling	132 (6.7)	312 (8.3)
Fragment	350 (17.7)	803 (21.4)
Other Grammatical	90 (4.5)	268 (7.2)

Table 3. Error Category Counts by Placement

In 2015, we expanded our research to check the placements for the whole 2015 cohort (i.e. not only those who committed one specific grammatical error). We then looked for a relationship between error categories and a placement offer by examining the quantity of errors made by those who were offered a place in the health professional programmes and those who were not. If there is little relationship between errors and placement, we should see similar percentages for both groups. In fact, error rates in all categories are higher for those who did not receive a placement offer (Table 3 and Figure 3). Percentages are again determined by the number of possible responses.

We tested the statistical significance of these differences through logistic regression using a model which could predict the probability of receiving an

offer of place against punctuation, spelling, sentence fragment, and other grammatical errors, as well as LC mark for a maximal model (though we do not focus upon LC in detail here). All predictors were highly significant (p = 0.001 for spelling and $p < 0.001$ for all others). Students who make an error of any grammatical category are less likely to get an offer of place in the health professional programmes at the end of the year. While the Other Grammatical category has the greatest effect, all categories indeed have such an effect.

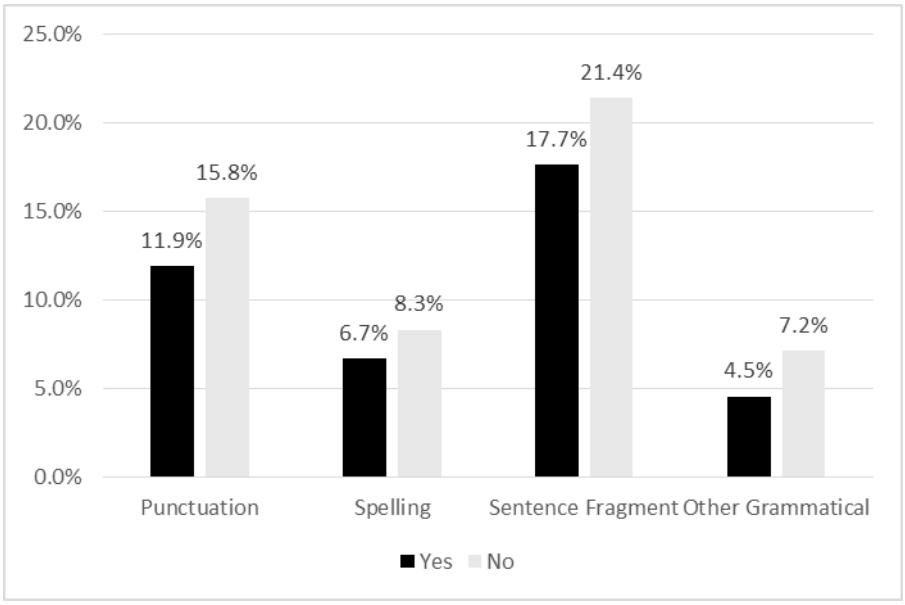

Figure 3. Error rates by placement offer

This effect is further corroborated by examining the relationship of the overall RC mark (comprised in part by the errors discussed so far) to an offer of place. Five bins were created based on the mean and the standard deviation. Two bins below the mean were created going down by one standard deviation and then that point to 0; 3 bins above the mean were created going from the mean up one standard deviation, two standard deviations, and then from that point to a maximum of 10 marks. The chance of getting an offer for each of these 5 bins is displayed in Figure 4. In a logistic regression model predicting place based upon RC mark and LC mark, both are significant (RC mark: Estimate = 0.147, *Wald's Z* = 11.679, $p < 0.001$; LC mark: Estimate = 0.177, *Wald's Z* = 8.347, $p < 0.001$). As the RC mark increases, so does the probability of getting a place. Indeed, the chance of getting a place doubles from the lowest to the highest groups.

While these data indicate a relationship between grammatical errors on the RC and an offer of place in a health professional programme, the nature of this relationship cannot be discerned from the data. One possible account is simply that high-performing students in general are high-performing both in Health Sciences First Year papers and on the English diagnostic test. In such an account, there is no direct causal link between errors and performance in papers taken during the first year of the Health Sciences programme. The RC mark simply indicates students who perform well in academic settings. Another possible account is that there is in fact a causal relationship between skills in formal English and later success. Students who have a large number of errors

on our test may also produce a large number of errors in future assignments and exams (perhaps impeding sense or stimulating negative appraisals of their work because they fail to match the expectations of a tertiary academic discourse community) and therefore receive lower marks. We cannot distinguish between these accounts with the current data, and they could in fact both be the case.

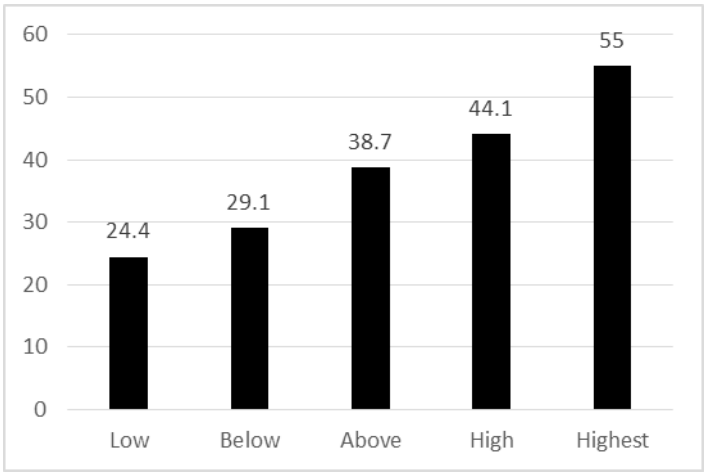

Figure 4. Percentage of Test Takers Who Received an Offer by Reading Comprehension Mark

CONCLUSIONS FROM OUR FOCUSING INQUIRY

Our data reveal two key causes for lower marks on the RC than on the LC. These causes have two implications for the paper that we provide to students who require extra English tuition. First, our data reveal that students' test-taking strategies are important. The decreased rate of blank answers between T1 and T2 suggests that familiarity with test structure helped the students to eliminate blank answers. Of course, not all tests in their university careers will come with second-chance opportunities. We should therefore teach general test-taking strategies that will allow students to succeed when they encounter tests for the first time. Second, even though our data do not reveal precisely how grammatical errors relate to success at university, we can teach the grammatical demands of tertiary academic discourse (i.e. correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation) until we do know how grammatical errors relate to tertiary academic success. While this teaching might very well come too late for many of these students to gain a coveted place in a health professional programme (i.e. these students may have already performed poorly in their first-semester papers), this teaching may help students to succeed in the papers that they are taking concurrently with the English paper and in subsequent years of study. Perhaps most importantly, the diagnostic test does provide a robust measure of the conventional writing skills that New Zealand students demonstrate soon after receiving their high school qualification. This data therefore might be of use to secondary school teachers and curriculum planners as they continue to assess their instructional methods based upon learning outcomes.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Summary of All Errors for All Students Taking English Diagnostic (T1 and T2 for 2014-2015)

Error Type	Number (% of total errors[6])	Error Category	Number (%*)
Full stop missing or full stop incorrectly placed	1090 (15.1)	Punctuation	2424 (33.6)
Initial capital missing	201 (2.8)		
Proper noun not capitalised	158 (2.2)		
Full stop and initial capital both missing	140 (1.9)		
Superfluous apostrophe	61 (0.8)		
Missing apostrophe	357 (4.9)		
Punctuation other	417 (5.8)		
Misspelled word	1075 (14.9)	Spelling	1344 (18.6)
Infelicitous word choice	269 (3.7)		
Infinitive when sentence required	635 (8.8)	Sentence Fragment	2440 (33.8)
Sentence complement when sentence required	226 (3.1)		
Subordinate clause when sentence required	273 (3.8)		
Participle phrase when sentence required	128 (1.8)		
Prepositional phrase when sentence required	165 (2.3)		
Bare noun phrase when sentence required	746 (10.3)		
General fragment when sentence required	178 (2.5)		
Missing subject	89 (1.2)		
Article error	111 (1.6)	Other Grammatical	887 (12.3)
Singular/plural	150 (2.1)		
Missing word	99 (1.4)		
Other sentence construction error	41 (0.6)		
Structure and organisation	96 (1.3)		
Subject-verb agreement error	272 (3.8)		
Incorrect conjugation	92 (1.3)		
Tense error	26 (0.4)		
Primed response	120 (1.7)	No Answer	1261
No answer (blank response)	1141		
Total (inclusive of blanks)			**8356**
Total (exclusive of blanks)			**7215**

*The total percentages do not equal 100 because Primed Response errors have been included in the No Answer category. Simply reflecting the wording of the question, Primed Responses do not attempt to answer the content of the question and are therefore closer to a blank answer

[6] Percentages are out of the total number of errors excluding No Answers.

than any other type of sentence construction error. Nevertheless, Primed Responses could still contain spelling, punctuation, or other types of errors.

Table 2. Examples and Explanation of Error Types

Error Category	Error Type	Examples* or Explanation
Punctuation	Full stop missing or full stop incorrectly placed	*I like dogs they are friendly* instead of *I like dogs. They are friendly.*
	Initial capital missing	*they are friendly.* instead of *They are friendly.*
	Full stop and initial capital both missing	*the pen is red* instead of *The pen is red.*
	Proper noun not capitalised	*thursday* instead of *Thursday* or *peter* instead of *Peter*
	Superfluous apostrophe	*it's colour is pink* instead of *its colour is pink*
	Missing apostrophe	*dont* instead of *don't* or *Janes book* instead of *Jane's book*
	Punctuation other	all other punctuation errors (i.e. commas, semicolons, colons, quotation marks, hyphens, etc.)
Spelling	Misspelled word	*fonetic* instead of *phonetic*; *althete* instead of *athlete*; *befor* instead of *before*; etc.
	Infelicitous word choice	choosing an incorrect homonym (e.g. *accept* for *except*), confusing meaning (e.g. *disinterested* for *uninterested*), etc.
Sentence Fragment	Infinitive when sentence required	*To go to school.* instead of *He wants to go to school.*
	Sentence complement when sentence required	*That smoking is bad for you.* instead of *Research shows that smoking is bad for you.*
	Subordinate clause when sentence required	*Because it is harmful.* instead of *He quit smoking because it is harmful.*
	Participle phrase when sentence required	*Walking to school.* instead of *She is walking to school.*
	Prepositional phrase when sentence required	*In the yard.* instead of *She is working in the yard.*
	Bare noun phrase when sentence required	*A computer.* instead of *He bought a computer.*
	General fragment when sentence required	all other incomplete sentences, frequently appearing as though the student ran out of time to complete the response (e.g. *The main idea of this article is to argue that drink driving should be*).
	Missing subject	*Goes to school.* instead of *She goes to school.*
	Article	omitting an article when one is needed (e.g. *He needs to see doctor.* instead of *He needs to see a doctor.*)
	Singular/plural	using a singular word when a plural word is required or vice versa (e.g. *We must*

Other Grammatical		*guard nuclear bomb.* instead of *We must guard nuclear bombs.*)
	Missing word	omitting a word in a sentence (*She goes school.* instead of *She goes to school.*)
	Other sentence construction error	all other types of sentence-construction errors that impede sense, such as misplaced modifiers (e.g. *Jane is going out with a man who has a Honda named Peter.*), vague pronoun references (e.g. *When she installed the program on the computer, it crashed*.), etc.
	Structure and organization	a catch-all category for sentences that were nonsensical or did not immediately seem to follow the rules of English syntax (e.g. *The main idea of the article is to stop nuclear, in the futures to using and ban.*)
	Subject-verb agreement error	*he are going* instead of *he is going*
	Incorrect conjugation	they *should have saw* instead of *they should have seen*
	Tense error	using the past when the answer should be in the present. This type includes aspect problems as well—e.g. using a continuous aspect (e.g. *are going*) when a perfect aspect was required (e.g. *have gone*)
No Answer	Primed response	mimicking the question, but giving no further information. For example, if the question asked, *What is the main point of the article?*, the response might read, *The main point of the article is*. Often this type of response had no terminal stop (but in this instance that error was not recorded as an "Full stop missing or full stop incorrectly placed" error).
	No answer	providing no response

* In order to protect the privacy of our students, we have created examples that demonstrate each error type. We have often simply substituted content words.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MICHAEL COP
Department of English and Linguistics
University of Otago

Michael Cop received his PhD from the University of Otago, New Zealand, where he now lectures in writing and Shakespeare as well as coordinates the English Diagnostic test for Health Sciences students. His current early-modern research explores narrative patterns in Biblical narrative verse; his current research into writing looks at the relationship between students' written competency and subsequent academic success.

HUNTER HATFIELD
Department of English and Linguistics
University of Otago

Hunter Hatfield received his PhD from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in linguistics. His work focuses upon the processing of language in many forms: syntax, pragmatics, and phonology.