
Viewpoints

A call from a non-native English speaker: don't look at my affiliation

I am writing this article under strong emotion. Just today I have received a review of one of my articles from a science journal; I read there, "The English at present is not at a standard, which allows publishing the manuscript in an international journal. [...] Actually nearly each sentence needs corrections."

My first thought was, "Oh dear, not again... I have not received such comments for two years or even more, I have paid so much attention to learning English, I have read so much, wrote so much, done so much, and despite all those efforts, again?..." Mildly put, I was disheartened, depressed, dejected. Is my writing so bad indeed?

After calming down, however, I recalled an interesting situation I had encountered about three years ago. I wrote an article with three colleagues; two of them were affiliated to my university, and the other one was a well-known overseas scientist, who kindly agreed to support us with his knowledge by discussing the research and editing the article. Worth mentioning is that he was generally acknowledged to be an expert in scientific writing and was an editorial board member of several core journals in our research field. Anyway, we submitted the paper to a very good journal. After some time this colleague let me know he received our article for review with a request for careful checking the language because the editor supposed it was very poor. Politely informing the editor about his co-authorship of this article, he underlined that in his humble opinion nothing was wrong with the language. Of course such mistakes in managing manuscripts happen and this is not the point here; the point is that this person was the co-author of the paper and was acknowledged by the editor to be a language expert, and it was his editing what gave the final shape to the manuscript. Conclusion? The editor was biased against the affiliation to the Polish university, and was unlucky to miss our overseas colleague's name among the co-authors. No matter how much I try, I can't come up with any other clue for the editor's behaviour.

Even if not often, such situations do happen in the science community. Richard Webster, the former editor

of the *European Journal of Soil Science*, from whom many could learn how to write scientific papers, describes a similar situation.¹ He wrote two articles with a group of non-native English scientists. Both these articles were returned to the authors from the journals they were submitted to with the recommendation that they "obtain linguistic help from a native speaker". Though such stories may be funny, it's rather sorrow than enjoyment that fills my heart when I hear them: I know what kind of feeling reading such unfair comments may cause. I don't even want to guess how many non-native English scientists received them.

Of course I am not talking here about articles of which the language is unacceptable. Most of us, non-native English speakers, write poorly and our writing quite often, if not usually, is indeed unacceptable. Nonetheless, even among us one can find scientists who write in good English, at least good enough not to deserve comments like the above; and I am sure even such people receive them sometimes. My main point is that an author affiliating a university or institute from a non-English speaking country always has to be aware that such reviews can and likely will come, no matter how good his or her English is.

I am not saying my language is good or acceptable for scientific journals and that the language of the article in question was not bad. But I hope that the claim that "nearly each sentence needs corrections" is not true in the case of the present article. Just to give you the whole picture of my writing, I requested the Editor-in-Chief of *European Science Editing* not to edit this article before publication, and asked nobody else for comments or editing. Hence any mistakes come from my poor writing skills and do not reflect *European Science Editing's* editing abilities.

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Reference

1. Webster R. Let's re-write the scientific paper. *European Journal of Soil Science* 2003;54,215-218.

Editor's note

When I received this viewpoint contribution earlier this year, my initial reaction was one of dismay: surely this scenario is exaggerated, or else based upon one or two unfortunate experiences. So, I sent it to two members of the ESE Publications Committee to see what they thought. The response I got was something of a surprise – that yes, things do get rejected out of hand simply because the English is not as polished as it could be. Moreover, one

of these individuals – a highly respected, native English speaking editor – said that she had received comments from a reviewer that one of her papers needed attention to the language!

Far from this being an occasional occurrence, it seems that the excuse of poor English is used as a way of rejecting manuscripts, a handy tool to have in these days of heavy submission loads and the need to "cull" manuscripts before

peer review. This seems a very short-sighted thing to do – to reject something out of hand, that might be very worthy scientifically – simply because the English is less than perfect (of course if the English is so poor as to make the text impossible to understand, then that is a different matter altogether). After all, what are we editors for? One could argue that all authors should (as many of them already do) make use of a native English-speaking editor before submitting any manuscript; this is one of the aspects explored by Langdon-Neuner in the article reprinted in this issue of ESE.

Intrigued by the initial contribution and spurred on by the comments of my colleagues, I decided to investigate a little further by posting a question on the EASE-Forum. How many of the forum members had come across this problem? How had they dealt with it? And what ideas did they have for solving this difficulty?

It was quickly pointed out that the problem could be one of simple prejudice, and that merely having a non-English surname or working in a non-English speaking country could be enough to trigger a rejection justified on the basis of poor English. I therefore followed the first question with a second one concerning name and geographical location. This second foray attracted fewer responses, but those contained some interesting points.

Below are the two questions and some of the responses. If you subscribe to the EASE-Forum you will have seen most of these already. If you don't subscribe, please consider doing so; you would then be able to follow discussions such as these as they happen, and have the opportunity to contribute – the more contributors we have, the more useful the Forum will become.

The first question

Dear Forum members, I have received a viewpoint contribution for ESE describing how an author's manuscripts have been rejected based on the apparent poor quality of the English in them – unjustifiably so in the author's opinion. I am interested in finding out how common an issue this is among both the non-native and native English speakers of EASE.

The responses

A selection of the responses reveals that there is indeed an issue: some respondents offered their personal experiences, while others pointed the way to useful sources of information. One even suggested that we carry out some testing of the theory that it doesn't matter how excellent the substance of a manuscript – if the English and presentation are not fine-tuned it will fall at the first publication hurdle.

We should offer support to authors

From Marge Berer, mberer@rhmjjournal.org.uk

I regularly receive submissions from people whose first language is not English. Most of them will have obtained the support of a native speaker of English with expertise in their subject, if not (also) a translator, in ensuring their papers are in good English. However, translated papers are notoriously not-quite-English. Such papers almost always

need a substantial amount of copyediting for language (apart from the usual problems with writing that are not restricted to authors whose first language is not English). I give that editing support myself because otherwise my journal would end up with papers primarily from authors from the few English-speaking countries.

If we want to claim our journals are international, I believe we have to live up to what it means as regards language and that implies giving that support. Many journal readers (including peer reviewers and I dare say some editors) may not have the experience of deciphering the quirks of language of non-English-speaking authors, especially if they do not have English as a first language themselves. I taught English as a foreign language for 10 years before I became a journal editor, so I find such deciphering easier, but that's unusual. Even so, I regularly have to ask authors to reword a sentence or a whole paragraph because I just cannot figure out what it means to say. I also regularly have to guess and ask the author whether I'm right.

If the journal(s) to which the author in question has submitted papers are unwilling to give editing support for language, the author needs to get the help of someone else to improve their written English before submitting a paper and while revising. If they disagree with a journal, there is presumably no agreed form of arbitration as to who is right about the accuracy and quality of language.

Writing for the "real world"

From Ed Hull, edhull@home.nl

This thread of opinions touches on a topic close to my heart, and that is how to teach researchers, whether native or non-native English writers, to write for the "real world". I teach scientific writing at various universities in Holland. Although my students have English language problems, most PhD students, as well as other researchers, have more serious problems that cannot be solved by a native-speaking editor or corrector.

Unfortunately, our educational system has not prepared us to write to busy "real world" readers. We learned how to write to teachers, professors, and supervisors. Those readers HAD to read our texts – they were paid to do that. Furthermore, they probably knew at least as much about our topics as we did – they were not looking for new information. Those readers were looking for indications that we had done our homework, that we were smart, that we were proficient in using the jargon and buzzwords, and that we had followed instructions. And one crucial instruction was to "write 3000 words about..."

Well, our first goal was to get 3000 words on paper – long blah-blah sentences worked very well for this. Especially in our language courses, English, Dutch, German or whatever, we learned certain style rules that might apply to thrillers, novels, and science fiction, but certainly do not apply to science or technology. Some of those rules that I remember are: never use the same word twice in a sentence, use synonyms to bring your work to life, paint pictures with your words. And we learned to give our teachers what they were looking for because we wanted to pass the course.

Most of us in science want to achieve much different goals, and our readers are very different. We want to have readers cite our work in a positive way – an indication that we have contributed to science. But real-world readers do not have to read our texts; even worse, they probably do not have time to read them. We are in this strange situation where everyone has to write and publish, but no one has time to read. We have to seduce busy real-world readers into reading our texts. They have to see immediately that an article offers them something they can use in their own work. Just like the old gold diggers, readers of journal articles are searching for easy-to-grab nuggets – credible science that gives them something of value.

In other words, much of what we learned about writing at school does not serve us well in the real world. First of all, I think we need to make a distinction between “academic writing” and “real-world writing”. Documents written at the professional level are NOT just academic exercises – they are meant to add real value in the real world. And, a document only achieves success AFTER a sequence of events: someone sees value in the document, is thereby motivated to continue reading, can then easily read and understand it, finds nuggets he or she can use, and then cites it in his or her own work. PhD students need courses in real-world writing; such courses should be offered by every university.

Journals can also help by including tips on real-world writing in their instructions to authors. Such tips, of course, go much further than layout, active vs passive voice, use of “I” or “we”, etc. Such tips should help authors to show the value of their work, how to turn their messages into nuggets, how to build in credibility, and, in short, how to address real-world readers.

English as an International Language

From John R Benfield, j.benfield@verizon.net

Born in Austria, educated in the US, and a long time editor, I have a major interest in English as an International Language (EIL) authors (we now prefer that term), prompted by the fact that nearly eight years ago the European Association for Cardiothoracic Surgery asked me to speak about that topic when I was its honoured guest (Benfield JR, Howard K. The language of science. *European Journal of Cardiothoracic Surgery* 2000;18:642–648). I have been extraordinarily fortunate to be able to maintain relationships with first class language professionals.

1. We have evidence, among that group of manuscripts and eventual articles we studied in detail, that manuscripts from EIL authors require more revision, but usually do not suffer a higher eventual rejection rate as compared to articles written by authors fully proficient in English.

2. We have extensive experience, which can be illustrated with many examples, that language professionals and peers (subject experts) bring different skills to EIL authors’ manuscripts.

3. We believe that ideally each article from an EIL author who is not fully proficient in English deserves the attention of a high quality language professional and a peer with specific expertise in the subject of the article.

4. We think that “with privilege comes responsibility” (Benfield JR, Feak CB. *European Science Editing* 2003;29(2):37).

5. Without significant funding, we have presented numerous interactive programs for EIL authors, and we have evidence that they have been effective and written evaluations that indicate their success.

6. We have a well thought out template whereby to address the issue of EIL authors, most recently (January 2007) expressed in writing to a cardiothoracic surgery audience (Benfield JR. *Cardiothoracic surgeons divided by a common language. Annals of Thoracic Surgery* 2007;84(2):363–364) and expressed verbally in February 2008 to the Academic Surgical Congress of the Society of University Surgeons and the Society for Academic Surgeons.

7. We would like to see societies, journal editorial boards, and funding sources come together to develop meaningful, ongoing support systems for EIL authors.

8. The goal is improvement in scientific reporting and dialogue.

How peer review can improve writing

From Karen Shashok, kshashok@kshashok.com

Problems with the role of peer review in improving “the English” or the writing were analysed in my article in *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, “Content and communication – how can peer review provide helpful feedback about the writing?” (2008,8:3; doi:10.1186/1471-2288-8-3). The reference list may be a useful place to look for research on this topic – which comes mainly from applied linguistics or sociolinguistics. (Since most of their practice is empirically based, STM gatekeepers have yet to realize that there are academic researchers and specific disciplines that do proper research on this.)

Unjustified complaints about “the English” have been a problem for ages. If the grammar or syntax is wrong and the level of proficiency in written English usage is simply too weak to allow the reader to understand the content, then the manuscript cannot really receive a fair review (or “respectful reading” – a phrase Mary Ellen Kerans hit on almost 10 years ago).

But if the writing is correct but different from what the reviewer or other reader expects it to read like, this is another matter. Very often I see reviewers and editors criticize “the English” simply because of “style” or taste differences, not because they found it hard to understand the actual messages.

A further issue is when the gatekeeper’s own proficiency in English is weaker than he or she assumes (or is outmoded), but the gatekeeper nevertheless criticizes correct English writing for faults that are absent.

Editors have begun to admit that problems with “the English” can lead to rejection even if the scientific content of a manuscript is strong. There is so much competition for publication now (and reviewers willing to donate a lot of time for heavy editing are on the way to extinction) that gatekeepers can afford to simply reject manuscripts that would use up “too much” of their limited resources (time or money) for editing.

Some justification

From Stuart Handysides, stuart_handysides@hotmail.com

Editors have to offer reasons for rejection. If the author's use of the editor's language does not enable the editor to follow the argument then there is no alternative but to reject.

Having had to assess and edit articles in English written both by native English speakers and by those for whom English is a second language, I have observed that coherence and elegance are not necessarily greater in articles written by native speakers of the language.

Words of encouragement

From Natasha Cohen, tshalouiza@gmail.com

Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine has an (unofficial) policy of never rejecting a paper solely on the quality of the English. Where a badly-written paper contains publishable material, our editors always go back to the author with a request for revision, usually including guidance on a company or companies specializing in editing STM papers. We feel it is unethical to reject manuscripts purely because of language difficulties – after all, the majority of us would not be able to write anything at all in a foreign language!

An opportunity to do some research

From Yateen Joshi, yateendra.joshi@gmail.com

Let the author send you several manuscripts that were rejected because the author did not meet the standards of English expected of him or her by the journal.

Take a few 250-word excerpts from these manuscripts and add a few more excerpts from other published papers that were accepted without the issue of the standard of English being raised; doctor them to remove any obvious pointers; and put up all the excerpts on a website.

Invite EASE members to visit the website and assign the excerpts to any of the three categories: (a) acceptable without copyediting for language; (b) requires copyediting to improve the standard of English; (c) can't say.

This will at least yield some hard evidence provided the test yields statistically valid data.

The second question

As a follow up to my post a few weeks ago, here is another one. It was pointed out to me that I may have posed the wrong question.

Perhaps the question should have been this: 'What happens if you submit a manuscript as an "apparently non-native English author", perhaps because your name is foreign (as is mine), or because you have a non-UK email address or work as an ex-pat. Are you then judged harshly because you are perceived as non-native even before anyone has taken the time and effort read your text?'

Does anyone have any interesting experiences to share?

Positive news

From Margaret Corbett, mcorbett@ntlworld.com

In my (rather small) experience, the reverse is the case, with lenient judging because authors from other countries should have a fair chance of having their papers published.

What's in a name?

From Kersti Wagstaff, kersti.wagstaff@sfeep.net

Speaking only as a copy editor, I suspend judgement on readability until I have started to read the paper. There are so many native-born Americans with "foreign" names, so many "foreigners" who have spent years in the USA or UK and whose written English is fluent, so many other foreigners who get hold of good translators, so many Brits working in odd places all over the world – and (at least in the UK) so many authors born in the UK who cannot string together a complete sentence reliably, that I have long given up making any assumption about linguistic ability on the basis of name alone.

Once I have started to read, I draw my conclusions pretty rapidly, however – always bearing in mind that different parts of the manuscript are sometimes written by different people, so a shaky start may be followed by a fluent discussion – or, unfortunately (since it is much harder to second-guess a discussion), the other way around.

I would agree with Stuart Handysides' observation that "coherence and elegance are not necessarily greater in articles written by native speakers of the language". I have often had cases of Japanese authors who struggle with the English language, but because they are very clear in their own minds exactly what they want to say and how they want to present it, copy editing their papers has taken me less time than trying to wring some kind of clarity and continuity from the work of an undisciplined and possibly inexperienced native-speaker writer (eg, the junior author in a clinical research paper).

Let's applaud double-blinded reviewing

From James Hartley, j.hartley@psy.keele.ac.uk

One of the reasons I am in favour of double-blind reviewing is that it cuts out the initial knowledge of the authors name, especially if the name is foreign.

In electronic systems, like the one used for the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, the reviewing panel used to be sent electronically the titles of all the latest submissions with their authors, and members of the panel selected papers for review that they were interested in. This has recently changed – now we get only the titles. Unfortunately, when you download the paper, you still get the author's name.

My point is that seeing a list of papers with the authors' names allows you to see which ones are written by "foreigners". You might be wrong – people with "foreign" names are common in the US and the UK – but returning to your original question that prompted this reply, I am afraid that papers might not have been selected for review because of this.

Editors as the language gatekeepers

From Karen Shashok, kshashok@kshashok.com

I suspect that complaints about "the English" from reviewers and editors have done much to damage my reputation [as an author's editor] with clients, and have lost me a number of clients who felt their scientific peer must be right and I must be wrong, even if the gatekeeper's first

language is obviously not English, and even if I explain that the gatekeeper’s “corrections” introduce grammar, syntax, or scientific style errors where the text was perfectly correct as submitted.

I’ve often wondered if those readers who actually read the Acknowledgements assumed my first language could not possibly be English because of my Belarusian surname, and simply interpreted differences between my way of saying it and their preferred way as evidence that I was wrong and they were right.

When I started doing professional STM translation and author editing in the early 1980s I made it a point that my name would appear in the Acknowledgements to indicate my contribution to the text that was to be submitted. I insisted on this for three reasons: (1) to give credit where credit was due (a New England cultural value, perhaps; I was born and raised in a small town in Connecticut); (2) to take responsibility for “the English” so that gatekeepers would realize that if they wanted to criticize it, they should blame me and not the authors; and (3) to publicize the quality of my work in the hope that readers would notice, and perhaps wish to obtain my services.

After about 25 years in the profession I’ve realized that all three were interesting working hypotheses concerning readers’ reactions to the quality of “the English” in the text, but the evidence – in the form of gatekeepers’ feedback and the effect on my business of all those 3000 or so articles with

my name in the Acknowledgements – has not supported any of them.

The provisional conclusions I draw based on what little direct or indirect feedback “the English” has elicited over the years from gatekeepers are:

(1) readers don’t read the Acknowledgements very often, and don’t care about the pre-submittal language or editing support the authors obtained;

(2) even when a translator or author’s editor is thanked explicitly in the Acknowledgements, readers assume the authors were responsible for “the English”, and gatekeepers will very often complain about “the English” anyway; and

(3) a mention in the Acknowledgements is not an effective way to publicize your work if you are someone who works with authors.

It’s a question of competences. Gatekeepers are, we hope, subject experts who can evaluate the usefulness of the manuscript’s contents to its target community of scientists. But an interesting hypothesis for study might be that because gatekeepers come from many different cultural backgrounds and have internalized many different assumptions about “good scientific English style”, their perceptions of the language and writing are less likely to correlate than their perceptions about the scientific merits of the work. Gatekeepers may tend to assume they are authorities on “good scientific English style” when they are in fact overestimating their competence in this area.



See page 108 for a report of ESOF2008 and EASE’s outreach activity: playing the scientific publication game