
Essays

Publishing challenges faced by authors with English as a second language

Trevor Lane

Edanz Group, Japan; tlane@edanzgroup.com

Julian Tang

Edanz Group, Japan; jtang@edanzgroup.com

Abstract: Edanz Group Ltd, an English editing and publication support company established in 1995, provides professional academic English services to authors for whom English is a second language. Feedback from these authors has consistently shown that they value not only language editing, but also advice on how to overcome practical barriers to publishing research in international peer-reviewed journals. In this article, we outline some of these barriers and argue that editing service providers play an increasingly important role in levelling the playing field for authors for whom English is a second language.

Keywords: Communication; editing services; publishing; writing

Introduction

For the past 20 years, Edanz Group Ltd (<https://www.edanzediting.com>), an English editing and publication support company based in Japan, China and the Republic of Korea, has been helping authors for whom English is a second language (ESL) to publish their research. During that time, demand has grown not just for manuscript editing, but also for services and educational workshops related to navigating journal submission and peer-review processes. To continue understanding and responding to the evolving needs of ESL authors, we have regularly obtained feedback through surveys, workshop question-and-answer sessions and correspondence during manuscript editing. This feedback has informed us about the textual and sociocultural challenges experienced by ESL authors when preparing and submitting journal manuscripts. Here, we briefly explore the linguistic and socio-pragmatic barriers that ESL authors say they face when publishing the results of scientific research.

Challenges of publishing in English

English is today's lingua franca of science research communication. Nearly all of the 3746 journals in the Science Citation Index, which lists journals with impact factors, are in English.¹ Because research performance is still often officially judged by the impact factors of journals publishing the work of a researcher, an institution or a whole country, English has a privileged status for academic reputation and progress, even in countries in which English is not an official language – for example, Japan, China and the Republic of Korea.

Reporting the results of scientific research in English should mean increased chances that the research is read, discussed, cited, used and built on, as well as increased

chances of collaboration with global networks of researchers. Accordingly, ESL authors have to learn and use academic English to meet the expectations of multiple stakeholders worldwide and thereby build a reputation and establish an area of expertise through their written research output. During their careers, ESL researchers aim to participate in international “discourse communities”² that communicate about and through research articles. An overlapping aim is to move from peripheral to central participation within international “communities of practice”³ that share common practical learning goals.

At the outset, however, ESL authors must conform to specific academic genres and formatting requirements to satisfy the gatekeepers of science – namely, journal editors and peer reviewers.⁴ Submitting a manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal is much like applying for a job. The manuscript contents, including the cover letter, must match the journal's aims, scope and readership. The goal is to gain and retain membership of that journal's discourse community, akin to joining a company or club with its own conventions and rituals. The process is challenging enough for any author, let alone ESL authors. Furthermore, because journal audiences include both readers for whom English is their first language and ESL readers, ESL authors need to make a special effort to be clear, concise and convincing.

Why authors require expert scientific English assistance

Many ESL authors tell us that they do not understand or are unaware of journal publishing ethics (especially those related to avoiding plagiarism and so-called self-plagiarism), submission procedures, and copyright and archiving policies. They also face difficulties when trying to interpret and respond to comments from reviewers and editors during the peer-review process. For example, comments containing indirect directives expressed as statements (“I don't understand this” or “This is unclear”) or as questions (“Can this be clarified?”), probably out of politeness,⁵ can be particularly confusing for ESL authors. Instead, they may expect and respond only to explicit instructions for revision that are in the imperative form (“Please explain this”). English language journals and their publishers thus need to ensure that their aims and scope, policies, procedures, instructions and correspondence are understandable, and findable, by ESL authors.

Indeed, surveys commissioned by Edanz showed that Chinese authors commonly find it challenging to select a target journal and comprehend its guidelines and peer-

review correspondence.⁶ Such results justify the need for comprehensive and personalized assistance from English editing companies, as well as individual authors' editors,⁷ to enable timely publishing. Services beyond editing can include educating authors, advising on journal selection, formatting manuscripts to guidelines, developing cover letters, helping with the reviewer response process and providing presubmission peer-review guidance. At the same time, it is crucial that any advice given by editing service providers must also be carefully phrased for ESL authors, including in presubmission peer-review reports and in author queries during editing.

When we are asked to help with responding to peer reviewers, sometimes we clearly notice that the comments sent by a journal were written by ESL reviewers, making comprehension yet more difficult for ESL authors. Furthermore, both ESL and native English speaking reviewers occasionally criticize a manuscript's "grammar", but are actually referring to overconfident or inappropriate claims, readability problems due to structural or lexical complexity, or their own preferred style. The strength of claims depends on the quality of evidence and structure of the argument rather than language, although certainty and stance can be conveyed with various hedging devices.⁸ Readability is related to word choice, sentence length, rhetorical relations, voice, emphasis, parallelism, thematic progression and discourse organisation. Authors are frequently unaware that they can increase readability through text reorganization, shorter sentences, simpler words, the active voice, parallel constructions and logical connectors. Perplexed authors even ask us to arbitrate when reviewers recommend unidiomatic phrases and incorrect collocations or cite idiosyncratic rules, such as using only the passive voice or avoiding "may" and "because" in science writing.

Specific questions that we have repeatedly received at workshops illustrate the fact that ESL authors need more support than just language editing of a draft product. Consistently raised topics show an unmet need for researcher education on publishing processes, avoiding so-called predatory publishers and predatory author services, research integrity, and developing process and genre approaches to academic writing. The following is a selection of questions that have been commonly asked in the past year during Edanz workshops delivered to more than 3000 ESL researchers:

1. Many journals use plagiarism checkers; what percentage of text overlap is allowed?
2. What should I do if I haven't heard from a journal office for one year after manuscript submission?
3. Can I answer spam email from a journal inviting me to send a manuscript?
4. How do I find a trustworthy journal?
5. How do I find a trustworthy editing service?
6. Why do I need to name the funding source in my manuscript?
7. Does my department head have the right to add his/her name on all my papers?
8. Will a journal be interested in an English translation of my previous paper?
9. Do all journals ban authors from writing "I" and "We"?
10. Should I preview the conclusion at the end of the introduction?

We have also met some ESL authors who say they avoid writing in English altogether because they believe that publishing for a domestic audience will directly benefit end-users. We help them to realise the potential wider implications or interest derived from publishing in English and that being highly cited is important to their careers and their institution's reputation. On further probing, these authors admit that too much effort is needed to learn English or find people who are willing and able to review their manuscript before journal submission. When researchers ask about machine translation, we inform them that such a practice is quickly noticed by journal editors, who may reject the manuscript without review or, if the data look promising, may request resubmission after rewriting. Our advice is to hire a professional translator and then enlist the services of an English editing service with editors who have special expertise, including experience in research, publishing, and editing for and advising ESL authors. For example, Edanz employs 400 subject-specific editors who can judge a manuscript's international appeal, suggest areas for improvement, and then edit the revision. After following appropriate procedures and permissions, authors could even publish the translation simultaneously or subsequently.

Why more science communicators are needed

We see three trends that call for more science editors to help authors effectively communicate their research. First, English language journals, especially those that are open access, are placing the onus on authors for copyediting before manuscript submission or acceptance. Second, several online international indexes now include non-English journals that publish articles or abstracts in English. Third, the pressure to publish (and publicise research to lay audiences after acceptance) in English is being amplified by the "third mission" of knowledge exchange/transfer, which is being adopted by an increasing number of universities and other higher education institutes worldwide.⁹

However, ESL authors' research institutions usually do not provide their own dedicated courses on publishing strategies and ethics, genre conventions and English for specific academic purposes, such as manuscript writing and active participation in discourse communities. The lack of such training does not bode well for institutions wishing to quickly gain international standing: they will lack international publications and continue to do so because today's ESL researchers will be supervising the next generation. Thus, science communicators and editors ideally need to act as trusted long-term mentors who can empower authors to overcome barriers to publishing in English language journals. Editing service providers will be increasingly relied on as educators, enablers, consultants and

mediators between ESL authors and science gatekeepers. This role entails being not only a “literacy broker”¹⁰ to improve the quality and publishing efficiency of high-stakes research texts, but also a knowledge broker and “network broker”¹¹ to facilitate engagement with transnational discourse communities.

Finally, editing service providers would do well to include different styles and genres in their repertoire and also to nurture lasting relationships with individual ESL authors. During a researcher’s career, high-stakes texts could include journal articles, book chapters, grant proposals, and conference slides and posters, in addition to non-academic postpublication documents such as media releases, newsletter articles and white papers. Knowing how to edit different document types and facilitate their publication would be mutually beneficial to both editor and author: it would help in the retention of clients throughout their careers while playing a part to promote their careers. Above all, being truly author-centred requires a constant commitment to supporting ESL authors and requesting – collectively through editing companies and associations such as EASE – that journals and publishers adopt equitable research publication practices by reducing or removing publication barriers. Making the publication process transparent, with explanations in plain English and other languages, would be a first step. For example, Edanz has translated the author instructions of the *British Medical Journal* into Chinese.¹²

In our educational workshops, we call editors “author champions”. In fact, all science communicators are ESL author advocates. Through editing and offering publishing assistance, science communicators give ESL authors a voice on the world stage.

References

- 1 Thomson Reuters. *Science Citation Index*. Available online at: <http://ip-science.thomsonreuters.com/cgi-bin/jrnlst/jloptions.cgi?PC=K> [accessed 16 December 2015].
- 2 Swales JM. *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- 3 Wenger E. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- 4 Hojat M, Gonnella JS, Calleigh AS. Impartial judgment by the “gatekeepers” of science: fallibility and accountability in the peer review process. *Advances in Health Sciences Education* 2003;8:75–96.
- 5 Searle JR. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- 6 Raye W, Hindle A, Shaw B. *Innovating the Authorship Experience: Overcoming Challenges on the Path to Publication Success*. Edanz Group Ltd, 2014. Available online at: https://www.edanzediting.com/sites/default/files/resources/for-authors/edanz-white-paper_0.pdf [accessed 23 February 2016].
- 7 Shashok K. Authors’ editors in the 21st century: promoters of publication quality and efficiency. *European Science Editing* 2014;40(3):60–62.
- 8 Hyland K. *Hedging in Scientific Research Articles*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1998.
- 9 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Actor Brief: Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)*, 2011. Available online at: <http://www.oecd.org/innovation/policyplatform/48373782.pdf> [accessed 23 February 2016].
- 10 Lillis TM, Curry MJ. Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars: interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English-medium texts. *Written Communication* 2006;23(1):3–35.
- 11 Curry MJ, Lillis TM. Academic research networks: accessing resources for English-medium publishing. *English for Specific Purposes* 2010;29:281–295.
- 12 BMJ Open. *Instructions for Authors*. Available online at: http://bmjopen.bmj.com/site/about/BMJOpen_instructions_for_authors_updated_qi.pdf [in Chinese; accessed 23 February 2016].

Award for EASE President



EASE President, Ana Marušić, will receive the Meritorious Award from the Council of Science Editors (CSE) at its 2016 Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado, USA, on 17 May 2016.

The Meritorious Award is the CSE’s highest, given in recognition of “the improvement of scientific communication through the pursuit of high standards in all activities connected with editing”. Previous recipients include ORCID, COPE, CrossRef, and Doug Altman.

The screenshot shows the CSE website with the following content:

- Navigation: Home / Events / Upcoming Events / 2016 CSE Annual Meeting
- Previous Annual Meetings:
 - CSE 2015 ANNUAL MEETING »
 - CSE 2014 ANNUAL MEETING »
 - CSE 2013 ANNUAL MEETING »
 - CSE 2012 ANNUAL MEETING »
 - CSE 2011 ANNUAL MEETING »
- 2016 CSE Annual Meeting:
 - May 14-17, 2016
 - Grand Hyatt Denver
 - Denver, Colorado
 - #CSE2016
- REGISTRATION INFORMATION »
- KEYNOTE »
- HOTEL & TRAVEL INFORMATION »
- SHORT COURSES »
- PRELIMINARY PROGRAM: MONDAY »
- PRELIMINARY PROGRAM: TUESDAY »