
Original article

Do freelance editors for academic and scientific researchers seek acknowledgement? A cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate the practice among freelance language professionals relating to seeking acknowledgement for editing texts by EAL (English as an additional language) scholars and scientists.

Methods: Freelance editors were recruited from three European organisations for freelance editors and translators. They completed an 8-question online survey (country of residence, broad area of specialisation and acknowledgement for their work). The data analyses are descriptive.

Results: There were 131 respondents, residing in 16 countries and representing four broad disciplinary areas (biomedicine (36;27.5%), humanities (27;20.6%), science (31;23.7%) and social science (37;28.2%). Netherlands-based editors were the largest group (60;45.8%). Only 19 (14.5%) of all respondents always actively encouraged authors to acknowledge language assistance: The two main reasons for always or sometimes seeking acknowledgement were ethics and self-publicity, each mentioned by 33(60%) of the 55 'always' + 'sometimes' respondents) Among the remaining 76 respondents, the two most frequently mentioned reasons for not seeking acknowledgement were never having thought about being acknowledged (24;26.7%) and the expectation that authors would introduce errors in the text before publication (21;23.3%).

Conclusions: Seeking acknowledgement is not a priority among these editors. They fear their work and reputation will be compromised by authors introducing post-editing errors and infelicities unintentionally and without consultation.

Keywords: Freelance editors, English as an additional language authors, science editing, academic editing, academic ethics

Introduction

The last 30 years have seen a large increase in the language services available to help EAL (English as an additional language) scientists improve their papers before submission to scientific journals. Links to professional scientific editing services in English are provided on the websites of many prominent journals, such as those published by Springer Nature and Elsevier, and an internet search for 'scientific editing' will bring up many companies offering these services. Many individuals also operate as freelance editors working directly for authors.

To date, most studies of the working methods and opinions of the people providing editing services

to academics and scientists have not recruited their participants from organisations for language professionals. An exception is a survey of members of the South African Translators Institute and Professional Editors Group,¹ which investigated their views on the task and responsibility of editing dissertations and theses. That study's motive – concern about the ethics of improving students' texts – has also driven research in other Anglophone countries. In the UK, for example, Harwood and colleagues studied the practices and ethos of 16 so-called proofreaders,²⁻⁴ but classified only three as 'professional', that is, persons 'who proofread as their main job'; the others edited student texts as a sideline, sometimes for free. More recently, Harwood has studied nine proofreaders, only one of whom (an English teacher) he classifies as a professional.⁵ Also driven by ethical concerns was an Australian study⁶ that examined the practice of editing student theses in the context of plagiarism. It distinguished two types of language professional employed to edit student theses: editors ('persons paid to provide editing services') and academic editors ('[editors] suitably qualified, trained and experienced to provide editing services for postgraduates and academics').

Comparable studies investigating the nature of editorial interventions and the differences between individual editors in non-Anglophone countries, however, have not been driven by ethical issues. One study in China⁷ compared the editing of a PhD student's science article by a Chinese freelance editor, an English-native-speaker agency editor and a Chinese English teacher. Others have focussed not on the editing of student-authored texts but on the editing of texts written by EAL scientists and academics. Several⁸⁻¹² have reported on scientists' use of so-called convenience editors (that is, English teachers, or English-native-speaker colleagues or acquaintances) and on their editing.

Surprisingly, especially in the case of the studies that consider the ethics of editing, none of the abovementioned studies has discussed the merits and practice of acknowledging that freelance editors have helped shape a scientist's or scholar's text. In two studies,^{6,13} authors refer to guidelines published by editors' organisations^{14,15} but do not note that these recommend acknowledging editors for their work. Over 30 years ago, a survey of scientific author's editors in the USA¹⁶ elicited information on their views on being acknowledged. More recently, freelance editors have argued the case for due acknowledgement for editing^{17,18} and the topic has been debated by EASE members.¹⁹

‘Giving credit where credit’s due: recognition for authors, translators and editors’ was the theme of the 2018 annual MET (Mediterranean Editors and Translators) conference. Expecting that in most sessions individuals or panellists would opine on or debate the desirability of acknowledgement, I decided instead to collect data.

One of my assumptions was that language professionals who edit texts by EAL scientists and scholars to improve the chances of acceptance by scientific or academic journals would know that many journal publishers and editors (notably the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors²⁰) recommend acknowledging language assistance. For example, (my emphasis):

This section must identify the source(s) of funding for the research. It should acknowledge any research assistants or others who provided help during the research (for example, carrying out the literature review; producing, computerising and analysing the data; **or providing language help, writing assistance or proof-reading the article, etc**) but who are not included among the authors.²¹

I suspected that even if freelance editors are ignorant of such recommendations, they would feel morally obliged to suggest that their clients acknowledge their assistance, in the same way that statisticians, technicians or fieldworkers are thanked for their contribution. I decided to survey colleague freelance editors to find out whether those working for EAL scientists and academics seek appropriate acknowledgement, their reasons and how editors seeking acknowledgement do so. I also hoped to elicit suggested phrasing of appropriate acknowledgement.

Methods

I conducted an online survey, using Google Form (a Google Drive application). Respondents were recruited through three organisations whose members include correctors, proofreaders or editors of EAL academic and science texts: MET (c. 330 members), SENSE (Society of English-language professionals in the Netherlands: c. 320 members)

and NEaT (Nordic Editors and Translators: c. 65 members).

The executive committees of these three organisations kindly arranged for their members to be emailed and invited to participate in the survey ‘Being acknowledged for editorial help to non-native-English academic & scientific researchers: A survey of freelance editors.’ The recruitment email specifically targeted freelancers, as I expected that in-house or agency editors would have to follow house rules and practices regarding acknowledgements.

The 8-question survey (see Supplement 1) was launched in early March 2018 and remained open until 15 April 2018. It elicited information on the respondents’ country of residence, broad area of specialisation, whether they actively seek acknowledgement for their work, their reasons, how they seek acknowledgement, and acknowledgement wordings used.

I analysed the data descriptively and presented the main results at the MET conference in Girona in October 2018.

Results

Respondents

131 people completed the survey. They were from 16 countries of residence: Netherlands (60;45.8%), Spain (25;19.1%), Finland (10;7.6%), Italy (8;6.1%), UK (7;5.3%), Germany (5;3.8%), Switzerland (4;3.1%), Belgium, France and USA (each 2;1.5%), Croatia, India, Morocco, Norway, Portugal and Sweden (each 1;0.8%).

Respondents were almost equally distributed between the four broad disciplinary categories: 36 (27.5%) biomedicine, 27(20.6%) humanities, 31 (23.7%) science and 37 (28.2%) social science. Together, editors working in biomedicine and science accounted for 67 (51.2%) of respondents.

Acknowledgement of the language professional’s assistance

As Table 1 shows, 19 (14.5%) of the respondents always actively encouraged authors to acknowledge their assistance, 36 (27.5%), said they did so sometimes and 76 (58%) answered ‘No’. Of the 76 respondents who did not actively seek acknowledgement, the largest group were social science editors: 28 (36%).

Table 1: Actively seeking acknowledgement: breakdown into 4 disciplines (131 respondents)

Answer	Discipline*				Total
	Biomedicine	Humanities	Science	Social Science	
No	19 (14.5%)	15 (11.5%)	14 (10.7%)	28 (21.4%)	76 (58.0%)
Sometimes	8 (6.1%)	10 (7.6%)	10 (7.6%)	8 (6.9%)	36 (27.5%)
Always	9 (6.9%)	2 (1.5%)	7 (5.3%)	1 (0.8%)	19 (14.5%)
Total	36 (27.5%)	27 (20.6%)	31 (23.7%)	37 (28.2%)	131 (100%)

*Presented alphabetically

Table 2 presents frequency data for the five suggested reasons for not actively seeking acknowledgement and for two categories created to capture reasons mentioned more than twice elicited by the option ‘Other’. The most popular

reason for not actively seeking acknowledgement (24;31.6% of the 76 respondents) was ‘It has never crossed my mind’; the next most popular reason (21;27.6%) was ‘The published text will probably have been changed for the worse’.

Table 2: Distribution of most common reasons (chosen/mentioned ≥ 2 times) for not actively seeking acknowledgement (76 respondents)*

Reason	N (%) chosen/ mentioned
It has never crossed my mind	24 (26.7%)
The published text will probably have been changed for the worse	21 (23.3%)
Due payment is sufficient acknowledgement	16 (17.8%)
I don't think it's important	12 (13.3%)
<i>Deference/Lack of self-confidence</i>	8 (8.9%)
My authors always acknowledge me	3 (3.3%)
<i>It's up to the author</i>	3 (3.3%)
<i>Work constraints (journal, 3rd party, etc.)</i>	3 (3.3%)
Total no. times chosen or mentioned	90 (100%)

*Respondents answered 'No' to Question 3. Reasons in roman type were options on the questionnaire, reasons in italics are categories created to capture additional freestyle responses elicited by the open option 'Other'.

Of the 24 respondents who chose 'It has never crossed my mind' to seek acknowledgement, 12(50%) were social science editors and 7(29.2%) humanities editors. This answer was chosen by only three science editors and two biomedical editors (together, 8.2% of all survey respondents).

Of the 21 (23%) respondents choosing 'The published text will probably have been changed for the worse', 7(33.3%) specialised in social science, 6(28.6%) in biomedicine, 4(19.1%) in the humanities and 4(19.1%) in science. For insightful respondent comments associated with this reason and the reason 'It's up to the author', see Supplement 2.

Most common reasons for seeking acknowledgement are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of most common reasons (chosen/mentioned ≥ 2 times) for seeking acknowledgement (all were options in Question 6) (55 respondents)*

Reason	N(%) chosen/ mentioned
It's ethical	33 (28.7%)
It's good publicity for my services	33 (28.7%)
It's good manners	25 (21.7%)
Acknowledgement is required by the journal or publisher	14 (12.1%)
It's important to raise the profile of language professionals	10 (8.7%)
Total no. of times chosen/mentioned	115 (100%)

*Respondents who answered 'Always' or 'Sometimes' to Question 3 have been grouped together. No additional categories needed to be created as the option 'Other' elicited only a few one-off responses.

In this group of 55 respondents, there were two equally important reasons for seeking acknowledgement for their services: ethics and publicity, each chosen by 33(60%) respondents. Comments are in Supplement 2.

Table 4 shows the most common ways of encouraging authors to acknowledge.

Table 4: Distribution of the most common ways (chosen/mentioned ≥ 2 times) of encouraging authors to acknowledge (55 respondents)*

Way of achieving acknowledgement	No. of times chosen/ mentioned
Suggesting appropriate phrasing	23 (27.7%)
Inserting appropriate acknowledgement in text	19 (22.9%)
Pointing out it's ethical	19 (22.9%)
Drawing attention to instructions or guidelines	13 (15.7%)
<i>Informally requesting</i>	6 (7.2%)
<i>Formalising in contract/agreement</i>	3 (3.6%)
Total no. of times chosen/mentioned	83 (100%)

*Respondents answered 'Sometimes' or 'Always' to Question 3. Ways in roman type paraphrase options on the questionnaire, those in italics are categories created to capture additional ways elicited by the option 'Other'.

The most frequently chosen way of achieving acknowledgement is to suggest appropriate phrasing (mentioned by 23; 41.8%); the other proactive option (inserting an acknowledgement) was chosen by 19 (34.5%), as was the option of pointing out that it's ethical to acknowledge language assistance. Table 4 does not include the methods mentioned by three Netherlands-based respondents, which effectively enhance their professional reputation: requesting permission to mention the author in the portfolio section of the editor's website (science editor); requesting a LinkedIn recommendation or testimonial, and suggesting or checking the wording (social science editor); and providing authors with certificates that text has been edited professionally (biomedical editor).

Participants were invited to give examples of the acknowledgement wordings they supply to their authors. Twenty-nine (38%) did so, sometimes providing several examples. Five of the examples were very short: they merely mentioned the language professional's name and that the service was editing (eg 'Editing by X'). One of these qualified the editing as 'scientific editing'. Only one respondent called the service provided 'author editing' ('Language author-edited by X, PhD').

Fifteen of the wordings expressed gratitude for the services rendered. Twelve did so using 'thank(s)' (eg 'We thank X for editing the manuscript'; 'Thanks are due to X for her thorough editing of the manuscript') and the other three used 'grateful' or 'gratitude' (eg 'The authors are grateful to X for his/her English language editing services.')

Several wordings were complimentary about the service provided: ‘Thanks are due to X for her thorough editing of the manuscript’; ‘We would like to thank...X for editing the manuscript to read better’; ‘We thank X for critical reading and editing of the manuscript.’ Three acknowledgements mentioned ‘improving’, two described the service rendered as ‘useful’. And the two wordings provided by one respondent were very specific:

‘This text has been professionally proofread/edited by ... Intervention consisted of [only] straightforward [/and] nuanced corrections balanced with preservation of the author’s voice. Date.’

‘X edited this text/article/dissertation to enhance its clarity and readability’

Table 5 shows the wordings in which the service provided was *not* described as editing.

Some wordings in Table 5 show how some language professionals attempt to cover themselves against being wrongly credited with errors and other disimprovements introduced by authors at a later stage. Five wordings mention ‘advice’ or ‘advising’ (authors may, of course, choose to ignore advice) and 6 mention ‘version(s)’. ‘final version’ was never mentioned (presumably because the final text submitted for publication might not be the version returned by the language professional).

Ten (17.2%) of the 58 respondents who took up the invitation to comment on the survey (Question 8) alluded to the problem/risk of authors ignoring corrections or inserting new infelicities or errors. One Italy-based editor even reserves the right to refuse acknowledgement. Supplement 2 presents three telling comments elicited by Question 8.

Table 5: Suggested wordings of acknowledgements not referring to editing, by discipline (12 respondents)

Discipline* (N respondents)	Respondent	Suggested wording
Biomedicine (6)	1	Many thanks to X for language revision of this manuscript I'd also like to extend my gratitude to X for English-language revision of this text. Any mistakes which remain are, however, my own
	2	We thank X for improving the use of English in the manuscript / for revising the language in the manuscript / for revising the language and for useful suggestions on the content and organization of the manuscript
	3	We thank X for the English language support in the revision and writing of our manuscript
	4	We are grateful to X for advice on English usage
	5	X translated an early version of the manuscript (and/or advised on the English language expression in) some revisions
	6	...for improving the use of English in the manuscript ...for translating the original manuscript into English ...for improving the use of English in the manuscript and for useful suggestions about the content
Humanities (2)	7	We thank/acknowledge X for writing assistance/proofreading
	8	Language correction/English proofreading: name, company name (website)
Science (2)	9	X advised on the English of a near-final draft of the paper
	10	X assisted with the English in a version of this...
Social Science (2)	11	I am grateful to X for revising the language of the manuscript
	12	X offered feedback on some versions of the article and translated it from A language to B language

*Presented alphabetically

Discussion

This survey of self-selected freelance editors from a range of countries (most in Europe) revealed that the majority don't seek acknowledgement for their work and that those who had never even thought of doing so tend to specialise in editing social science or humanities texts. Among the respondents who sometimes or always sought acknowledgement, the two most frequently mentioned reasons for doing so were ethics and self-publicity. Many respondents not only point out to authors that acknowledgement is ethical

but also either supply them with appropriately phrased acknowledgements or insert an acknowledgement in the text. Supplying appropriate wording can be seen as a damage-limitation tactic, as it enables editors to indicate whether authors might have made post-editing changes. That drawing authors' attention to guidelines or recommendations to acknowledge language assistance is not among the top three ways of seeking acknowledgement suggests that respondents are generally unaware that these

exist. Concern about authors disimproving edited text is an important disincentive for not seeking acknowledgement and was also often mentioned spontaneously.

Some comparison with the 1980s survey of science author's editors in the USA¹⁶ is possible. Although that survey seems not to have asked whether the respondents sought acknowledgement, it does report their views on how they should be acknowledged. Of the 87 respondents, half of whom specialised in biomedicine, 10.3% made acknowledgement a precondition for editing, 27.6% requested acknowledgement and supplied wording, and 37.9% would make the request but not supply the wording. 28.7% had other strategies (categories were not mutually exclusive). Some respondents also commented that authors sometimes disimprove: one, whose authors usually acknowledged him/her voluntarily, noted 'sometimes wish they wouldn't on papers that include ill-advised changes made after my final editing'.

Although it is heartening that ethics do motivate some freelance editors I surveyed to be proactive about securing due acknowledgement, the finding that others avoid seeking acknowledgement because they fear being compromised professionally by authors' changes to the post-edited text is disturbing. It exposes a lack of mutual trust and respect, because the editor and the author should share the goal of achieving an error-free publishable text. Authors' lack of trust of and respect for freelance editors might be a response to the wide range in competence and professionalism among those who edit academic or scientific texts.^{13,7} It might also reflect unawareness of how committed and conscientious professional editors can help them achieve their publication goals, as authors are unlikely to have read descriptions of the work of such freelance science editors written by applied linguistics scholars²² or by freelance editors themselves.^{17, 23–25}

Another reason for an author not acknowledging language assistance might be reluctance to admit to needing such help. Evidence supporting this (two comments and a personal communication from a retired Dutch humanities professor) is given in Supplement 2.

Although both authors and editors might prefer editing assistance not to be acknowledged, not disclosing such assistance runs counter to the principle of transparency in scientific and scholarly publication – as also recently argued in a critique of CRediT (the Contributor Roles Taxonomy).¹⁸ It should be possible for acknowledgement to be hedged in such a way that editors are protected from being assumed to be responsible for errors and infelicities introduced at a later stage without their knowledge, while ensuring that authors do not feel that acknowledging professional language assistance compromises their reputation in their academic or scientific community. The findings from this survey might contribute to achieving this desirable situation.

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Supplement 1: The questionnaire

Being acknowledged for editorial help to non-native-English academic & scientific researchers: A survey of freelance editors

1. Which country are you based in?
2. Which is the main area in which you offer English-language assistance?
 - Humanities
 - Social science
 - Science
 - Biomedicine
3. Do you actively encourage authors to acknowledge your assistance?
 - No
 - Sometimes
 - Always
4. If you answered 'No' to Q3, what is/are your reason(s) for not seeking to be acknowledged?
 - I don't think it's important
 - It has never crossed my mind
 - My authors always acknowledge me
 - Due payment is sufficient acknowledgement
 - The published text will probably have been changed for the worse
 - Other
5. If you answered 'Sometimes' or 'Always' to Q3, what is/are your reason(s) for seeking to be acknowledged?
 - It's ethical
 - I know acknowledgement is required by the journal/publisher
 - It's good manners
 - It's good publicity for my services
 - It's important to raise the profile of language professionals
 - Other
6. How do you encourage authors to acknowledge you?
 - By pointing out it's ethical to do so
 - By drawing their attention to author instructions or guidelines
 - By suggesting appropriate phrasing
 - By inserting an appropriate acknowledgement in the text
 - Other
7. If you supply authors with acknowledgement text, please provide one or more examples of the wording.
8. Comments?

Supplement 2: Insightful comments

1. From respondents who opted for The published text will probably have been changed for the worse and/or It's up to the author as a reason for not seeking acknowledgement

Three respondents, all Netherlands-based, elaborated on what 'worse' might mean.

'It's been my experience that authors 'tweak' text after it's been edited. And usually the tweaks are incorrect. Also, I once had an author misspell my name in his Acknowledgement, which also had grammar errors. From that moment, I always ask authors to let me edit their Acknowledgement text. I don't need to be mentioned in it, because on my website I can always list the names of books that I've edited or list the names of journals in which articles edited by me have appeared.' (humanities editor)

'On occasion, the published text has shocked me. If I'm not acknowledged, I can't be sued.' (biomedical editor)

'If I ask for an official kind of inclusion on the author's acknowledgements page or some such, there is a real danger that I could be implicated in any errors and omissions in the text or problems that might arise due to publication of the text. I am not responsible for the study or theory or accuracy of the data, so I think my editorial work should sit well behind the name of the author.' (science editor)

The 'Other' responses to Question 4 included several that I have classified as showing deference to the author. Examples:

'I doubt they would want to draw attention to the fact that they had help with their language – especially academics!' (UK-based humanities editor)

'[Acknowledgement] Feels awkward, partly because my authors are sometimes very touchy about their English. Authors who aren't difficult acknowledge anyway (though I imagine some simply don't think of it).' (Germany-based humanities editor)

Examples of comments I classified as implying 'It's up to the author':

'It's not something I expect, but it's always appreciated when it happens voluntarily. I think the initiative for this has to come from the writer, however, whatever their reasons are for including such an acknowledgement. In other words, it has to be sincere.' (Finland-based social science editor)

'Due payment is sufficient acknowledgement, I don't want my clients to feel obliged to disclose to the journal/reviewers (or even their colleagues/peers) that they used a professional editing service. My clients have the right to discretion if they wish.' (Finland-based science editor)

A Netherlands-based social science editor who noted that authors should decide admitted to insecurity:

'That is their choice to make/Wary of giving the impression that I think too highly of myself/Deference in relation to their position as professor or client/Substantive and developmental editing are perceived as too close to co-authoring due to misunderstandings about editing versus authoring/this is particularly so in the social sciences and humanities where the quality of the writing is important.'

2. Two respondents' comments relating to reasons for seeking acknowledgement.

'Journal editors take manuscripts more seriously if they see they have been edited by a professional.' (Croatia-based science editor)

But a Finland-based biomedical editor who mentioned only the reason 'It's important to raise the profile of language professionals' noted:

'Many journals do not allow acknowledgement of language revision. I know of none who require this to appear in the text.'

3. Three comments elicited by Question 8

'I have been acknowledged and it gave me great pleasure when I was pleased with the published work but on balance it is more risky than not if you don't get to see the final text.' (Italy-based social science editor)

Re authors' reluctance to admit having received language help:

'...[some authors] don't want to admit they've had language help' (Spain-based science editor)

'One of my authors told me she prefers not to include my name in the acknowledgements of her manuscripts since this means admitting she had help with the text. She seems to think others would think less of her.' (Netherlands-based biomedical editor)

4. A personal communication from an emeritus Dutch humanities professor

When I mentioned the survey to a retired professor in early spring 2018, she admitted that she never acknowledged language assistance. But later, after discussion with her husband (also a humanities scholar), she emailed me (in Dutch) to say that in the 1980s, when it was unusual for Dutch humanities scholars to publish in English, they asked friends or English native speakers to check their English, recompensing them with a token fee or a gift. But in the 1990s they stopped acknowledging language assistance, because:

'... it became required to publish in English and we were expected to write in good English.... [We] were well aware that our English wasn't that good and so had all our articles looked at professionally, often for a high fee. And we stopped acknowledging. We don't know exactly why, but we think there are two reasons: 1) we paid for good English; 2) we didn't want to publicly admit that we couldn't [write good English] ourselves.' (my translation)