How Are Non–Native-English-Speaking Authors Coping with Requirements to Publish in English-Language Journals?

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In countries where English is not the native language, especially developing countries, publishing in high-impact-factor journals is often required for promotion or even graduation. That has put pressure on journal editors, particularly in the United States, where most journals that have high impact factors are published. The pressure to publish has also created a large market for English-speaking editors, editing companies, and companies that train authors to publish in English-language journals.

This session provided insight into how editors work with authors whose native language is not English. The speakers also noted resources that authors can use and identified problems common in manuscripts from non–native-English-speaking authors and ways to address the problems.

Scientific publications consultant Tom Lang said that the number of manuscripts submitted by authors whose native language is not English is increasing exponentially. Because bad English can mask good science, journals that receive more manuscripts than they can process may immediately reject poorly written ones without evaluating the science. One response to the problem is the emergence of “language-polishing” companies. Their primary function is to prevent the initial language-based rejection. Most of the companies claim that their editors are published, doctorate-level researchers in the same fields as the authors. Lang said that the prices of such services are often high but are lower than the fees charged by US-based professional editors. He advised editors to encourage non–native-English-speaking authors to consult with the language-polishing companies before submitting their articles for publication. Lang concluded by saying that although language is often a major issue with non–native-English-speaking authors, it is not the only problem with manuscripts submitted.

Mary Anne Baynes, an independent sales and marketing consultant, suggested ways for journal editors to handle the continued growth in the number of manuscripts submitted by non–native-English-speaking authors. She identified the following strategies: rejection, outsourcing editing, referring authors, author training, and others. She noted that editors who reject manuscripts written in bad English may miss out on good research. Baynes recommended that editors instead refer authors to outside language-editing companies or outsource the editing themselves. If referring authors, she noted that some language-editing companies can provide an editing certificate that can accompany the manuscript during submission. She added that training, such as Webinars, can help authors understand the requirements for publishing their manuscripts.

Philippa Benson, who has taught technical writing in China, shed light on the perspectives, pressures, and constraints of authors who are non-native speakers of English. Benson began by noting that many non–native-English-speaking authors believe that the IMRAD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) format is like a cookbook and, if followed as a formula would be, will produce an acceptable scientific article. Editors know that that is not true. Benson said that authors and editors have different expectations regarding scientific papers. She noted that many non–native-English-speaking authors have incomplete or incorrect information about the expectations and requirements for manuscript submission.

Journal editors should recognize that many authors, particularly those in developing countries, are not aware of instructions for authors, which are usually posted on journal Web sites. Benson commented that the distinction between “nonacceptance” and “rejection” is not clear to many authors; in fact, many authors interpret nonacceptance as rejection. Benson advised editors to remind authors to review journal instructions for authors carefully and strongly advocated that editors regularly review their instructions for authors to ensure that they are clear, concise, and explicit. Writing editorials, corresponding informatively with authors, “describing the review process”, “stressing the value of nonacceptance”, and providing authors with resources (for example, a link to AuthorAID) are ways of helping non–native-English-speaking authors. Benson concluded by stating that poor writing is not always the only problem with manuscripts from non–native-English-speaking authors. The lack of adequate knowledge of what editors require of authors is equally important.