Can Non–Native-English-Speaking Editors Be Effective Editors of English-Language Writing?

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Editing, like any other career, requires interest and skill. But it requires working
with words and language, so the question arises, Can a non-native-English-
speaking editor be an effective editor of English-language writing?

The topic is interesting yet tricky to
discuss. Some authors find it difficult to be corrected or edited by editors, especially
editors who lack an educational back-
ground similar to theirs, as is often the
situation. Adding a difference in native
language to that situation could pose a big
problem for both authors and editors.

Native–English-speaking authors have
many doubts. One is whether a non-
native-English-speaking editor is profi-
cient enough to understand the idiomatic
use of words and expressions. Another
is whether the editor can understand
the use of clichés (for authors who still
love to use them) and figurative expres-
sions. And some native–English-speaking
authors wonder whether non-native edi-
tors have acquired enough English vocab-
ulary to comprehend the complexity that
they encounter on the job.

Like a first attempt at most things,
the first editing experience may
be daunting
Some non-native-English-speaking editors may find their first editing experience posi-
tive; for others it is not. “It was challeng-
ing; I missed a lot of corrections I should
have made”, recalled Patrice Pages, a native
speaker of French and editor of
ChemMatters, a magazine published by the American
Chemical Society. Pages said that the fact
that a non-native-English-speaking editor’s

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first experience did not earn an ovation is
not indicative of lack of skill. The first edit-
ing experience varies from person to person.

Editing is more than just polishing the language
“Your training as an editor exceeds fixing
language problems,” Wei Liu, an editor of
the Chinese Journal of Cancer, explained.
Besides language, important components
of a manuscript that need to be checked
include structure, organization, tables, and
figures. Echoing Liu’s point, Tom Lang,
a scientific-publications consultant and
trainer, noted that non-native-English-
speaking editors should pay attention to
the logic of manuscripts they work with,
check for consistency, and ensure appro-
priate documentation. Be they native
or non-native-English speakers, those
guidelines hold true for all editors, added
Lang. Ana Marusic, editor-in-chief of the
Croatian Medical Journal, concurred, not-
ing that language is not even the greatest
problem with manuscripts. Instead, she
said, “study design and data presentation”
are the problems to look out for.

Pages compared the editing process with
sculpting. The editor (sculptor) conceives
the perfect image in his or her mind. It is
only after the image is clear that the editor
can begin to delete the unnecessary words
or correct the tenses that do not flow well.
Pieces that will interfere with the image
are removed. An editor or sculptor works
with the entire image, not just polishing but
cutting and plastering and then smoothing.

Will native-English-speaking authors want a non-native
English speaker to edit their manuscripts?
Darla-Jean Weatherford, editor of Reservoir
magazine, a publication of the Petroleum
Engineering Department at Texas A&M
University, who also teaches technical writ-
ing, said that she is not concerned with an
editor’s nationality. “I want to be sure that
the editor legitimately knows his or her
stuff,” she said. Weatherford explained that
if an editor makes changes that are obvi-
ously incorrect or restructures sentences
“into jumbled, circuitous ones, I’m going to
be upset regardless of the native language.”

Similarly, Lang said that all editors, includ-
ing non-native-English-speaking editors,
should always be able to “justify every edit
with a good rationale”. That, he said, will
help a great deal in establishing the editor’s
credibility with authors. Grace Darling, a
native Spanish speaker, echoed Lang’s com-
ment and added that self-confidence in one’s
editing skills is important for non-native-
English-speaking editors. “[Confidence] will
shine through in your interactions with
potential clients, but be [careful] not to
overdo it.” Pages explained that the issue
of credibility arises rarely if an editor shows
excitement and passion for the work that he
or she is about to do. He added that in work-
ing with an author who is equally driven to
get the best out of a manuscript, the passion
with which the editor works will override
any doubt of credibility. But sloppy and apa-
thetic attitudes toward manuscripts might
leave room for an author’s credibility and
even competence to be questioned.

Marissa Doshi, a native Indian and recent
graduate of the Science and Technology
Journalism program at Texas A&M
University, had a different experience. She
said that she has rarely been challenged by
native–English-speaking authors. Rather,
she has had to convince non-native spea-
kers that she is capable of editing their work.
Liu shared that sentiment.

There is no hard-and-fast rule about
what to expect from authors of particular
nationalities. Darling advised, whatever
the case, “Do not be intimidated. Put aside
personalities and concentrate on the clar-
ity of the message.” For most authors,
native and non-native alike, choosing an editor is not a function of his or her nationality but of factors such as knowledge, skill, and competence.

Knowledge of one’s weaknesses can be used as a tool to strengthen editing skills
A renowned standup comedian was asked to advise aspiring comedians. His advice for them was to make sure that their first joke was about their weaknesses. As counterintuitive as that advice may sound, it works and is applicable in a way to editing. Non-native-English-speaking editors don’t need to send their clients a detailed list of editing errors they commit; however, they should identify for themselves errors they are prone to committing, include them in a checklist, and let the checklist serve as a guide whenever they’re editing.

Liu said, for example, that native Chinese editors editing in English should know that the use or nonuse of articles is the first weakness to take note of. The second weakness for these editors is the correct use of verb tenses because, as Liu pointed out, Chinese has no verb tenses.

Similarly, Doshi and Pages added that Indian and French sentence structures tend to be very formal. Therefore, editors from those countries should take note to avoid recasting authors’ sentences because they read too informally. Darling also mentioned that some grammar rules are controversial even among native English speakers. She advised non-native editors who encounter such quandaries to discuss the appropriate usage with a native–English-speaking editor or colleague within the context of the manuscript they are working on.

For a non-native-English-speaking editor, being aware of the various idiosyncrasies of his or her language should serve as a guide in editing manuscripts.

Get into the language style
Getting better at editing in English requires a conscious effort. Non-native editors should know that English-language usage changes often and that the style rules of each publication can be different. The choice of whether to use e-mail or email, may or might, mother tongue or native language, serial commas or no serial commas—just a few examples—should be based on careful consideration of usage guides, tempered by awareness of the constantly evolving nature of the English language. Hence, editors need to stay on top of updates in their field.

Different audiences require different language choices. On encountering strange-sounding words, Pages suggested “ask yourself, ‘How will a native English speaker say this?’” He added that non-native editors should avoid sounding too sophisticated, because this may be perceived as overreaching. He also mentioned that when the editor has to choose between two words with the same meaning, he or she should always go for the one most commonly heard in conversation.

Weatherford suggested that getting better at editing in English requires immersing oneself in the language. She suggested watching television with the closed captioning on (at times, the captioning might be incorrect, but one can get the idea) and listening attentively to conversations among native speakers.

Liu added that to master editing in English, you should “avoid translating your thoughts back and forth.” Think in English. To improve, the editor should make sure that his or her everyday thoughts are in English. This way, the editor can practice English usage both consciously and unconsciously.

Now that English is fast becoming the lingua franca (or Tyrannosaurus rex as suggested by J M Swales’), there is increasing pressure on non-native-English-speaking authors to publish in English. Non-native-English-speaking editors working with these authors need to be conscious of words that contain elements of bias. Amy Einsohn in her book The Copyeditor’s Handbook (p 405) writes, “The principle here is . . . to prevent authors from unwittingly offending, marginalizing, or excluding groups of people.”

Even for native speakers, English can be complicated and confusing. Naveed Saleh, a native–English-speaking writer and editor, mentioned some of this confusion in his piece “Copyediting Confusion,” published in Science Editor (March–April 2010 issue). Some of the sources of confusion that Saleh mentioned are such issues as the use of that and which, auxiliary modal verbs, the different types of dashes, and hyphens—when and how they should be used. Many of these issues are frequently debated even among seasoned writers.

As guns and ammunition are to the army, so is . . . to the non-native-English-speaking editor
Thanks to the Internet, many tools are available for non-native-English-speaking editors who edit in English. But although the Internet may be a huge source of information, there is a tendency to be overwhelmed by the immensity of it all. In speaking with many experienced native– and non-native–English-speaking editors, I have found that they recommend these tools:

• The Internet—The efficiency and robustness of the Internet cannot be overemphasized. For example, Google Scholar can be used to search for definitions of terms, and numerous blogs, such as Editage (http://blog.editage.com) and Blue Pencil Editing (http://bluepenedited.blogspot.com), post editing tips. Web sites dedicated to grammar tips also provide continuing education. A good example is the very informative Grammar Girl Web site (http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com), which also offers downloadable podcasts.

• A good English dictionary—Many editors recommend Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (preferably the latest edition—the 11th).

• Books on editing—Three good examples are The Copyeditor’s Handbook by Amy Einsohn, The Elements of Style by Strunk and White, and Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage. Those are just three examples, and each editor may have different preferences.

• A stylebook—The Chicago Manual of Style; Scientific Style and Format; The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers; the AMA Manual of Style; and The Associated Press Stylebook are good examples. However, the choice of stylebook to use depends largely on the medium for which a manuscript is intended. The stylebooks listed here are meant only to serve as guides.
A style sheet—Editors may benefit from creating a style sheet for each manuscript edited. It will ensure consistency and can be shared with the authors so that they know the rationale behind the corrections and thereby learn in the process. As mentioned earlier, it’s also important to keep a personal checklist of errors that one is prone to overlook.

A preposition list—A comprehensive list of prepositions and their usage is available in Words Into Type by Marjorie E Skillin and Robert M Gay. The list is useful and has been recommended by editors as a good tool for distinguishing which preposition goes with what. This preposition guide is not all encompassing, but it is a handy and basic tool for a good start in editing in English. Having mastery of the English language and becoming a good editor require a conscious, consistent, and deliberate effort, Weatherford said.

Do not focus on improving language at the expense of other aspects of an article

Language is just one of the many aspects of an article, and it should not be thought of as the most important. Although it is important, there are other aspects of manuscript editing that should not be underemphasized. Depending on the type of manuscript—for example, research article, grant application, book, or popular-science story—various other aspects of a manuscript also require attention. An editor, whether native– or non–native English speaking, needs to know about statistics, data presentation, authorship issues, conflict of interest, formatting, and much more.

Establishing credibility as a non–native English-speaking editor isn’t based only on how much of the language one knows. Roma Subramanian, a science–journalism graduate student with experience in science editing, mentioned that besides proficiency in written and spoken English, a thorough understanding of a manuscript’s subject matter and the ability to ask the author well–researched questions are essential for demonstrating editorial skill and credibility.

Darling added that non–native speakers should not try to sound colloquial until they are totally comfortable with the language. Moreover, “you don’t need that in the sciences,” she said. Non–native–English-speaking editors can be effective editors of English–language manuscripts. With interest and skill, they may even make excellent editors if they can learn to leverage their not–too–technical vocabulary and make manuscripts that they work on clear and readable.

References