

Self-Identified Publishing Needs of Nonnative English-Speaking Faculty and Fellows at an Academic Medical Institution

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Manuscript editors everywhere, no matter what language they work in, face the dilemma of editing papers written by nonnative speakers. Among the dilemmas English-language editors face in these instances are incongruities in the phrasing of the independent clause and the choice of conjunction, contradictions between the sex of the person and the gender of the pronoun, contradictions in the number of the possessive pronoun and the number of the noun possessed, and confusion about the name of an object. Misunderstandings about the publishing and peer-review process itself can also arise. For example, authors who lack experience in the native culture may distort the meaning of communications with the journal editor in ways that harm their chances of being published.

The experienced editor notices patterns. American science editors may notice that the French do not seem to know possessive adjectives, the Chinese confuse *he* with *she*, the use of articles by others does not follow English language convention, one object is given many names to make the story “less boring”, and redundancy is used

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for emphasis. And nonnative authors from any country may respond to editorial-board criticism inappropriately. Some might write, “I am most thankful to the very expert reviewers for their kind and tremendously insightful criticism of my work, which has definitely infinitely improved it.” Another might write, “This reviewer is obviously completely unfamiliar with work in this field and has no standing for criticizing my work. Please send my manuscript to someone with some intelligence.”

Once those patterns are noticed and the same suggestions made time after time, the urge to help international faculty in both a systematic and a systemic way becomes irresistible. A large body of literature could support that effort. The *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Language Learning*, *Modern Language Journal*, *College ESL*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *English for Specific Purposes* are among the journals in which specialists in English as a second language (ESL) publish their papers. An annotated bibliography lists 676 ESL papers published in the 1993-1997 period alone.¹ A careful reading of the relevant papers could serve as the basis for designing an ESL program for international faculty.

Unfortunately, careful reading would not establish whether faculty members and postdoctoral fellows who are nonnative speakers of English (“ESL faculty”) at an academic medical institution have different needs from the typical student who enters collegiate ESL programs, the subject of most ESL articles. Although some of the literature explores the response of nonnative speakers to ESL training, little of it examines the perceptions of ESL faculty at an academic medical institution regarding their ability to navigate the conventions of scientific publishing. And yet, because ESL faculty make up a growing proportion

of American medical and science faculties and their success is measured largely by the papers they publish, the problem of nonstandard English writing takes on special importance for their institutions. After all, institutional self-interest dictates that every member of its faculty succeed, inasmuch as the institutional reputation rests on the reputation of its faculty. Determining the particular obstacles that ESL faculty in such an institution face in publishing their research is an important first step in designing a program that would help them.

To test our belief that ESL faculty at The University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center face specific roadblocks to publishing success, we undertook a series of interviews with native and nonnative speakers of English. The participants included postdoctoral students and junior and senior faculty. This paper reports the results of those interviews and suggests some solutions for and structural causes of the problems that were identified.

Methods

Study Group

The postdoctoral fellows and faculty of M D Anderson Cancer Center made up the study group. Several hundred faculty at M D Anderson claim non-English-speaking countries as their birthplaces; 251 of the faculty (including those at the rank of instructor) are not US citizens. In addition, there are many international graduate students and postdoctoral medical and science fellows, all of them intent on publishing their work and making a name for themselves in the world of academic medicine and science.

The international faculty and students were first trained in Austria, Belgium, Brazil, China, Czechoslovakia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India,

Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Peru, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, and Yugoslavia. These ESL scientists and physicians occupy positions ranging from post-doctoral fellow and instructor to full professor to chairman of an academic department. They have reached other important administrative posts, such as chairman of the M D Anderson Institutional Review Board, one of the busiest in the world.

We invited some 70 ESL faculty to participate; all had worked with editors in the Department of Scientific Publications at one time or another. We also invited all members of a list of 70 ESL postdoctoral medical and science fellows. We hoped to have 15 ESL postdoctoral fellows and 25 ESL faculty available for the interviews. The final group comprised 12 ESL postdoctoral fellows and 15 ESL faculty. Interviews with four native-born faculty were also conducted so that we would have their perspective.

Interview Methods

The interviews of ESL fellows and faculty were conducted in small groups. The postdoctoral fellows met separately from the faculty, but no effort was made to differentiate the faculty groups by seniority or title. The control group (native-born faculty) were interviewed one-on-one. One of us (FK) led the interviews, both because of her extensive academic and professional expertise in group dynamics and because, as an outside consultant, she could better reassure participants that their responses would not be identified individually. Responses were transcribed on paper during the interviews. Again to ensure confidentiality, the interviews were not tape-recorded.

The interviews were designed to elicit open-ended responses. To stimulate discussion by members of the ESL groups, three questions were asked, as follows: What has the publishing process been like for you here at M D Anderson? What are the challenges you face when publishing a paper? In what ways could the Department of Scientific Publications be helpful to you? Some follow-up questions were asked

if the context indicated that they were appropriate. For example, Do you think that having English as your second (or third or fourth) language has impeded your progress in writing and publishing papers? How is the process the same or different if English is not your first language? Have you published articles in languages other than English?

The four native speakers of English from among the faculty were asked the following questions: Do you feel that authors for whom English is a second language have a more difficult time publishing their work? How do you perceive that the publishing process is the same or different for those whose first language is not English? In what ways do you feel that the Department of Scientific Publications has enhanced your success in publishing? As was the case for the ESL groups, the interviews were open-ended and transcribed on the spot.

The question of how the native cultural milieu shapes a scientist's response to the publishing process in English-language science was not raised during these interviews. The question is interesting to us, but we have not determined how to explore it.

Compilation

The interviewer compiled the interview responses and arranged them by theme. Most of the compiled responses were nearly verbatim quotations, but in a few cases the interviewer summarized the tenor of the discussion.

Results and Discussion

Our discussion is compiled under each theme.

Trainees (postdoctoral fellows) have a more difficult time with writing and publishing than faculty do. The first two comments are by native-born faculty.

- "Trainees have the most difficult time. Typically, faculty does better."
- "With clinical trainees, we do a lot of spoon-feeding of conclusions. When it comes to writing, these folks are really at a loss."

On the surface, perhaps, those comments

are discouraging. However, beneath the surface is the implication that senior ESL faculty have improved their skills since their student days. Thus, a promise of better success can be held out for the trainees.

Coaching postdoctoral fellows and new faculty about their writing requires a lot of time. Some believe that coaching is of primary benefit to those who are being coached rather than those doing the coaching. When native-born faculty spoke of coaching, it was with nearly universal distress about the level of commitment required. There were no indications that the ultimate productivity of the laboratory warranted the effort, nor any sign that the teacher believed he or she might learn from the students.

- "Mostly, the perception on the part of senior folks is that helping fellows benefits them, not the senior folks."
- "Most people are too busy with their own work to help others."
- "Senior faculty members don't have much time to mentor, particularly for people who come for only 1 or 2 years. I guess it is very important."

Those quotations seem to indicate that senior faculty do not consider helping ESL faculty and fellows to be useful to their own careers. Their complaints do not recognize the possibility that these colleagues might, with sufficient training and attention, enhance the productivity of the research group.

Some native English-speaking people hold negative biases and assumptions about those who are not native English speakers. The following quotations are from native-born faculty.

- "Unfortunately, the foreign language speaker does look less intelligent when he is presenting research."
- "For ESL people, I know I will have to rewrite an article from A to Z."
- "They give me things that are 'completely unacceptable' for publication."
- "I like this guy, but he would probably do better [elsewhere]. He's not our caliber."

The last comment was made within earshot of the international faculty member

Publishing Needs continued

in question.

ESL faculty are aware of their deficits. Sometimes native-born faculty speak of the writing skills of their ESL colleagues in dismissive terms. The following quotations, however, show that ESL postdoctoral fellows and faculty are well aware of their writing difficulties and of their mentors' attitudes.

- "Our mentors tell us *to* write, not *how* to write."
- "My mentor shows respect in how he corrects it [my work]. Most of the work is mine. English is my weak link."
- "My experiences were different when I was working in other people's labs. The lab manager sometimes discussed changes he wanted to make in my manuscripts, but he made the changes regardless [of what I said]. [Now], as an independent faculty member, I send things to Scientific Publications for editing and then I decide what pieces of their advice to follow. Simultaneously, I send the paper to my coauthors and then take their suggestions."
- "The first problem is not even being able to be heard. Then, it is not being able to express ideas, and henceforth you are not seen as valuable contributors."
- "The trainees usually write a first draft and then an English-speaking faculty rewrites it."
- "Collaborators don't really like to look at my papers because of all my grammatical errors."

The disappointment about, and perhaps even resignation to, the responses of their mentors reverberates in those last three quotations from ESL faculty and fellows. Clearly, they are conscious of how they are treated.

Many ESL faculty are unfamiliar with English-language conventions of logical structure and scientific language. Sometimes ESL scientists do not know how to structure science articles.

- "For me, English is not the problem; I've spoken English all my life. Writing a technical paper is the problem."
- "First we have to study scientific papers.

We have to look at how we express and how we think about the conclusion. Even if the data is the same, how we think about the data might be very different. Our best support comes from our lab."

- "I have written 35-40 articles—20 in Korean and 10-15 in English. The challenge is to know the American way or the M D Anderson way."
- "I have written papers and chapters in my language. Here it is difficult to understand the structure. The hardest is the discussion."
- "In China, the paper is three pages; a long paper is 10 pages. How papers are structured is different. Some parts are longer, some are shorter."

Limited understanding of English often underlies poor success in publishing. The difficulty can, of course, be rooted in ignorance of the English language. International faculty and fellows know they are not proficient in English. Although it is not surprising, this deficiency can easily be overlooked in the search for "systematic" solutions, which are often oriented exclusively to the writing process and maintaining the writer's self-confidence.

- "I have trouble with grammar and how to say things the English way and not the Chinese way in terms of language."
- "Sometimes I change a paragraph five or 10 times to try to say something as an American would say it. That's the hardest part."
- "My vocabulary isn't as big. It takes a long time. It's difficult to start. I know some things, but I don't know how to express it clearly."

Self-fulfilling prophecies may limit opportunities to improve writing skills. Many cases are adult analogues of the quiet student in the back row of the classroom who is never challenged by the teacher's expectations.

- "You develop an ability to tell whether a person is keen on learning writing skills or not [and you mentor only those who are really keen]."
- "For people who speak English as their first language, I expect that the writing

will be good."

The ESL literature deals extensively with the issue of self-fulfilling prophecy and its mirror image, the tendency to judge just-adequate writing as superior if an ESL student wrote it.²

ESL faculty improved some solutions. To help them overcome their obstacles to publishing success, the ESL faculty and students cited the need for four kinds of specialized editorial service: establishing patterns of science writing, gaining access to a translator to help the writer search for the right word, gaining access to editors who know the author's science, and improving methods of teaching writing.

Patterns of expression: Several people talked about how they study a scientific publication to see how it is written, how sentences are structured, how information about data is expressed. When they find sentences that express what they want to say, they use them as templates.

- "I need a model of a published article to read. That is where I start before writing."

Translation:

- "Having the support of an editorial office [Scientific Publications] is important. We know the English part can be taken care of. It would be helpful to have someone who speaks my language to help me say things that make my message clear."

Science knowledge:

- "Because Scientific Publications people are not scientists, an English-speaking scientist would be helpful for editing."
- "Scientific Publications editors don't correct scientific things."

Some expressed fear that when papers are edited, the interpretation of data would be distorted. Native-born writers are much less concerned about this risk because their life-long exposure to English nuance allows them to recognize such distortions more easily. Furthermore, it is ironic that American-born faculty are exceedingly surprised by how much editors with liberal arts degrees seem to know about science. Of course, editors are in fact not so much knowledgeable as they are clever: They can

follow a line of argument, look at the cues and clues in the sentence, and detect errors that on the surface would seem to require a scientist's knowledge to recognize. The ESL faculty's increased emphasis on the editors' lack of science knowledge is probably related to the inability of ESL faculty to give the appropriate clues as to the progression of the logic. Figuring out what is wrong takes specific knowledge of the scientist's own field because so many of the language cues that editors typically rely on are either missing from the logical progression of ideas or, if present, misleading. Indeed, ESL writers may deliberately omit such clues because they believe their understanding of English is too limited to get the nuance right.³

Education: The Department of Scientific Publications gives short and long presentations on manuscript and grant writing, but the ESL faculty and postdoctoral fellows asked for specific improvements in the program.

- "It would be useful to have comments on how to improve for next time."
- "Help for junior faculty to learn earlier about writing well would be great."
- "Opportunities to work in small groups on writing manuscripts would be very helpful."
- "The Scientific Publications department seminar is too general. We would like homework and then discussions afterward."

Suggestions for Improvement

The comments from the ESL faculty regarding specialized editorial services they would like led us to propose the following suggestions for groups interested in improving the writing of ESL faculty systematically.

- Create a model of a scientific paper for writers to use, showing the desired (American) structure of presentation of data, discussion, and so on.
- Make explicit the ways of doing things (such as structuring a sentence and expressing an idea) that were long ago learned and integrated into the minds of editors who speak and write English as a first language. Much of what editors do has been internalized and has become second nature. Editors need to be explicit with details that now seem like common sense.

- Make it clear that virtually everyone struggles with writing, at least at first.
- Provide in-depth coaching of fellows and faculty from the very beginning.

Conclusion

A collision of self-interests is revealed by the quotations from native speakers of English and ESL faculty and fellows. Native-born faculty members complain that mentoring juniors, especially ESL fellows and faculty, in the art of writing takes more time than writing the manuscripts themselves. They recognize that better writers would be valuable additions to their laboratories, but they are unwilling to assume the cost of training. The ESL fellows and faculty desperately want to improve their English writing skills so that they can become more valuable and productive scientists. The cost of the collision falls most heavily on the ESL scientist, in that the principal investigator (PI) achieves his or her primary goal, high productivity in laboratory experiments,⁴ while the ESL scientist remains unschooled in an essential skill of the trade.

One of us (WP) has been approached by PIs many times with the request that the editorial group hire a staff writer rather than an editor so that data gathered in the laboratory can be reported in the literature. The alternative suggestion to the PIs, that they give writing assignments to postdoctoral fellows and junior faculty, is answered by statements that their groups are composed largely of ESL scientists who "cannot write". And yet suggestions that writing in English be among the array of skills evaluated in potential graduate students and postdoctoral fellows cause the PIs to cite the intelligence and work ethic of international scientists.

We are led to the conclusion that ESL scientists have been dealt a Faustian bargain. At the time the bargain is made, the senior faculty know they want smart, hard workers that they do not have to spend too much time with, and the ESL fellows and junior faculty want an opportunity to study and work in the United States. The Faustian nature of the bargain goes unrecognized until the ESL fellow or junior faculty member learns that the growth and recognition that come from writing are not part of the bargain. Nevertheless, the terms of the

bargain are often left unchanged.

We believe that it remains in the best interests of an institution to provide the training that allows ESL fellows and junior faculty to become successful scientists and academic physicians. Systemic training at the individual laboratory level is an oxymoron: the invention of a system for two postdoctoral fellows seems inefficient on the face of it. Why build a factory to make two objects? But on an institutionwide basis, especially in an institution with an editorial department, a systemic approach would be inherently efficient. One set of solutions we propose includes better training of ESL students, fellows, and faculty in the fundamentals of science writing early in their tenure. In addition, perhaps formal processes could be devised to guide the interaction between ESL and native-born faculty and trainees when they discuss expectations and directions for a particular laboratory's papers. Finally, adaptation of the ideas expressed by ESL scientists in the interviews regarding changes in how editors work with ESL authors ought to be successful. After all, each one of the ESL faculty and fellows is deeply committed to writing well and anxious to take an independent place in the roster of eminent scientists.

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