

Bridging the Gap: Working Productively with ESL Authors

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As we work toward an integrated global scientific community, with English as the *lingua franca* (or, as linguist J M Swales suggests, the linguistic *Tyrannosaurus rex*), scientific editors are increasingly called on to edit papers written by authors for whom English is a second language. Pressure to publish in English is intense, and writing is a difficult skill for many scientists (and editors). How many of us are aware of just how much additional effort it can take a nonnative speaker, even one who is fluent in spoken English, to produce a publishable document? Some English-as-a-second-language (ESL) writers are able to write in English with ease, but a great many spend countless hours struggling to express themselves at the level of sophistication of which they are capable in their native languages. One postdoctoral fellow, fluent in spoken English, told me recently that he spent 10 hours composing a brief but important e-mail regarding a job offer.

The process of composing text goes beyond using grammar, word choice, and sentence structure to making complex decisions about organization, rhetorical style, relationship to the audience, and establishment of author credibility. The use of those features (known in linguistics as aspects of rhetoric, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics) reflects decisions that are made partly at a cultural—not grammatical or logical—level. They are rarely taught explicitly but are absorbed by writers as a part of their academic training, so they are hard to “see” and talk about and thus to analyze and manipulate. Grammar can be looked up in grammar books, words and phrases can be looked up in dictionaries,

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but sentences and paragraphs cannot be looked up. The US standard composition model (on which the scientific-article model is based)—with its thesis statements, topic sentences, introductions, and conclusions—is understood as a universally applicable product of logical thinking rather than the cultural artifact that it is. When English-speaking educators and editors can make the assumptions of that model explicit and contrast it with other traditions of writing, ESL writers are able to get to the heart of some of the more abstract patterns of sentence, paragraph, and document organization.

Even when ESL writers are aware of English composition techniques, an underlying issue remains. Some of the conventions of professional scientific writing in English conflict with conventions that ESL writers have acquired for their own languages; thus, some ESL writers may feel uneasy in following an editor’s recommendations in these cases. Addressing those mismatches openly can reassure a writer that the editor has met his or her concerns.

What are the unseen stumbling blocks? Here are some that ESL writers themselves have identified. Although the items in this list are not intended to apply to all ESL writers (or to characterize non-English rhetorical styles fully), they may arise unexpectedly from time to time, even when a writer uses otherwise fluent and idiomatic English.

Rhetorical Structure

Linear style: English expository writing uses a top-down, linear style in which the main assertion is stated up front and then supported with details, both at the document level and at the paragraph level. (examples: hypothesis or purpose stated in the introduction, paragraph topic sentences and unity, and so on). You may be familiar with some of the other identified

cultural styles, such as circular and zig-zag,¹ but it is not necessary to be an expert on them. What is important is to know how some ESL writers experience the linear style. It may feel barren, oversimplified, and lacking in a suitable level of subtlety and development. (And they may think, “Why would a reader finish my article if I’ve already made my point at the beginning?”) I once attended a presentation that a professor of North African origin gave to an English-speaking audience. Although the content was relevant, robust, and sophisticated, the organization of the talk was decidedly nonlinear. From what I overheard of the audience around me, some judged him harshly for that linguistic transgression. The disconnect did not lie in the speaker’s lack of fluency in English or of experience as a lecturer; it lay in his choice of organizational strategy, and neither the lecturer nor the audience was able to identify the problem. To bridge that unseen gap for authors, editors can explain that the simplicity of the English style is intentional and contributes to, rather than detracts from, the writer’s credibility and professional image.

Explicit conclusions: Another hallmark of the English expository style is the preference for making explicit, unequivocal conclusions, not leaving to chance whether the writer’s point will be taken accurately or not. In some non-English styles, that can be viewed as unsophisticated, even as trivializing the subject. Elegance and subtlety, showing respect for the reader’s erudition, may be the preferred style. Discussing the contrast with ESL writers can be helpful as they develop their style in English.

Unified argument: It is not unusual to see a more extended point-counterpoint style of argument development in articles of other traditions, with authors presenting a point and then discussing (sometimes at length) others’ views on the point without clearly and succinctly positioning those views

with respect to their own (that is, agreeing with, disagreeing with, or qualifying them). One writer recently remarked, “But I have to include all of those [irrelevant] studies to prove how much work I’ve done!” That writer had been trained to include a broad array of citations to prove that he knew and understood the field, in contrast with the more instrumental English strategy of including only studies directly relevant to the author’s study. In some cultures, it is also a familiar practice to honor one’s adviser with citations that might not be considered relevant by English-language standards. A junior writer may feel obliged to make such references. Recognizing that for some ESL writers those are motivated strategies rather than accidents of inexperience can guide an English-speaking editor in making recommendations.

Sentences, Grammar, and Words

At this level of writing as well, there are hidden challenges that are not easy for writers to find in reference materials. Here are some useful things to be aware of:

Patchwriting versus plagiarism: Patchwriting in the ESL context^{2,3} is a widely used strategy in which writers recycle already-composed sentences or fragments from other documents (published or not published, their own work or others’). It is also referred to as “stealing words, not ideas”. Although patchwriting is a reasonable labor-saving technique (as opposed to composing each sentence from scratch), it can sometimes lead writers to the borderline of plagiarism. How can we help writers to save time and effort yet also steer them away from crossing the line? We can explain nonjudgmentally what the different degrees of “borrowing” are and how they might be viewed in the English-speaking scientific or academic community. Another way is to provide writers with lists of stock phrases that are used repeatedly in articles, such as

“Our findings suggest that . . .”,

“So far, only qualitative findings have been obtained . . .”,

“The purpose of our study was to determine . . .”,

“Unlike X et al, we observed that . . .”,

and so on. Writers can also be shown how to mimic the general structure of a model paragraph while creating their own. With those tools, writers can more easily learn to generate their own acceptable sentences and paragraphs as they continue to develop their voice.

Use of first person and active voice: English-language science-writing convention has shifted in recent decades from favoring use of the third person and passive voice to favoring use of the first person and active voice. Not everyone who writes in English is aware of the shift, and not all who are accept it. Even for some English-speaking writers (or their advisers!), the cultural shift may be uncomfortable; for ESL writers, whose cultures may value a modest professional persona, it can be even more uncomfortable. It’s a matter of etiquette. Using the first person can feel self-promoting or boastful. And using the active voice, of course, triggers the use of, and focuses attention on, a first-person subject (whereas the passive allows the writer to avoid the issue). Rather than simply instructing writers to use the first person and active voice, editors can be alert to the possibility of underlying unease and, when it is appropriate, point out English-language trends in author self-identification.

Use of transition words and phrases: Using transition words in expository writing might be the quickest and easiest way to increase coherence and readability, and ESL writers in particular can benefit from this simple technique. The more a language’s clause structure and other typologic characteristics differ from those of English, the likelier it is that such mechanisms as subordination, coordination, and apposition will differ as well. Thus, a speaker of Chinese or Arabic who is an eloquent writer in his or her native language may be daunted by the task of crafting complex sentences and paragraphs in English. To improve clarity appreciably in the short term, ESL writers can make liberal use of transitions. Providing a list of commonly used transitional words and phrases (such as *however, in contrast, similarly, first/second/finally, specifically, and to summarize*) and

encouraging writers to take advantage of them can make their task a little easier.

As ESL authors go the extra mile to publish in English and contribute to global science, science editors can make a contribution by becoming familiar with the additional challenges that these authors face and working to find solutions. Articulating editorial assumptions about persuasion, credibility, and logical organization and looking for tools that can help to fast-track authors into the mainstream style will ease the process—and deepen our own knowledge of science editing in the bargain. 🌐

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