

# Understanding the Challenges of Non-English-Speaking Authors

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The American editor criticizes the Spanish author because the discussion section doesn't frame the interpretation of results; the author retorts, "It's not my job to tell the reader how to interpret my paper."

The Chinese author—whose subtle authorial voice reflects lessons learned in school—is offended by the English-speaking editor who insists that the paper state its propositions up front, in a purpose-oriented, "loud" way; the frustrated author asks, "Why are editors so rude?"

Cultural differences in rhetoric and communication style are among the key issues facing the burgeoning numbers of authors from around the linguistic world when they are compelled to write professional scientific papers in English. The burden of writing at this level in a foreign language can be daunting and difficult, and it involves more than just mastery of science and sentences.

This session explored how non-native-English-speaking (NNES) authors can be supported in using the English-language style and how editors can be supported

in understanding manuscripts from NNES authors.

Moderator Carrie Cameron introduced the session with an overview of the challenges facing NNES authors, who may have differing levels of English proficiency and conflicting concepts of language use. The problem is embedded in the complex process of producing credible written communication that not only represents the author's voice and knowledge but incorporates rhetorical and organizational strategies commonly accepted in English.

Barbara Gastel and Li Han provided real-life examples of challenges that Chinese authors face and how editors can address their concerns. On the basis of experiences with the China Medical Board training program—which Gastel oversees and in which Li served as an intern—they shared responses to an informal survey completed by program participants.

Among their findings was recognition that "writing a paper in English is more than just translating the Chinese version." For Chinese authors, for example, organizing a paper in English is difficult in part because Chinese authors tend to put the main point at the end; expressing meaning fully is a challenge in part because of vocabulary constraints; and the logic of a scientific paper, especially introductions and discussions, is sometimes baffling.

The most valuable help that native-English-speaking editors can give consists of concrete suggestions, such as pointing out which sentences are unclear and where the ambiguities lie. "It needs to be more than general criticism," said Li. "They need direction in where they are going wrong." She suggested that for a better understanding, the editor should provide a checklist addressing structure, language, hypotheses, figures, tables, references, and other details.

Li specifically advocated the "criticism sandwich" approach: provide praise for the

paper's strong points, indicate the problem, and top it off with hope that after improvements, the paper can be published.

Gastel added that editors should encourage authors to focus on content, organization, and clarity rather than dwelling on the fine points of language. "If the content is there", she noted, "it's a joy and an easy matter to edit clumsy language."

Editors and authors also should strive to see each other as real people and to use editing as a teaching and learning tool. "It's not about just this paper", Gastel pointed out, "but about how this author will do in the next 10 papers."

Panelists suggested that this kind of mentoring will not only improve the quality of the papers written in English by talented scientists of all backgrounds but improve the relationships between authors and editors.

Before closing, Cameron noted that cultural differences also may lead to unintentional plagiarism among NNES authors. She provided tips for raising awareness and skill through training, education, and consultation.

So, why do non-English-speaking authors sometimes find editors rude? Why do the authors seem stubborn? And what can bring them together?

Perhaps it's a matter of expectation and understanding. "If both sides know there's a difference", said Cameron, "there can be a more balanced style of criticism and a better author-editor experience." 