

Advantages of English-Fluent Chinese Editors over Native-English-Speaking Editors in Editing Chinese Biomedical Manuscripts

Hua HE and Ke-Jian GAN

As is the case in many English-as-a-second-language (ESL) countries, the quality of the English language in manuscripts written by Chinese authors is below the typical standard evident in most English-language journals. Thus, further editing of manuscripts written by Chinese authors is essential. It is commonly believed that editing by a native-English-speaking editor is more accurate than that by an ESL editor. In our experience, however, this is not always the case. Here, we summarize what we see as the three major strengths that Chinese biomedical editors with skills in English possess over native-English-speaking editors with comparable credentials: better understanding of the logic of the Chinese language, better communication between the Chinese author and the editor, and greater economy.

With the rapid economic growth in mainland China, more well-designed biomedical studies are being performed. Biomedical scientists and clinicians increasingly prefer to publish their work in international English-language journals.¹⁻³ However, the ability of many Chinese researchers to write in English is still poor because they lack training in the English language and in communicating scientific findings. Improving scientific articles from Chinese authors to satisfy their desire to communicate with an international audience is increasingly important.

Many Chinese biomedical researchers have received comments from international journals such as “this manuscript must be carefully reviewed and corrected by a native English speaker or edited by

a native English editor before it can be considered for publication”. Those authors take it for granted that after they have sought help from a native English speaker—a native English teacher or colleague in the author’s university, an academic collaborator in an English-speaking country, or a native English editor (for example, at a professional editing company in an English-speaking country)—the language problems will have been resolved and their manuscript will be suitable for acceptance. However, after resubmission, many Chinese authors are disappointed and confused because the journals’ reviewers or editors still have problems with the revised version of their work, particularly language problems. The authors cannot understand why their work still poses language problems after being edited by native English speakers. In contrast, many Chinese biomedical researchers seek assistance from Chinese editors who are fluent in English and have their scientific articles published in international English-language journals without much difficulty.

The aim of the present article is to identify the reasons behind this phenomenon by drawing upon our own experience, illustrated by a few examples taken from our own and our colleagues’ work.

Advantages of English-Fluent Chinese Editors (“Chinese Editors”) over Native-English-Speaking Editors (“English Editors”)

Over the years, we have observed that, compared with English editors, Chinese editors with an academic background and a good command of the English language tend to produce better editing of manuscripts submitted by Chinese authors, particularly those with very poor English-

writing skills. We summarize some of the reasons below with a few anecdotal examples. All the examples were received from English editors holding a PhD or a master’s degree in biomedicine or Chinese scientific editors holding equivalent credentials.

1. Chinese editors are familiar with the intrinsic logic of the Chinese language and how it influences Chinese authors’ way of thinking.

Example 1

Original version

“All patients were discharged free of preoperative symptoms.”

Edited by an English editor, with comment

“All patients were discharged when free of post-operative symptoms.”

The editor’s comment: I think this should be POST-operative.

Edited by a Chinese editor

“All patients were discharged when free of symptoms.”

Our comment: The author’s meaning is that when symptoms that resulted in hospitalization (preoperative) disappeared, the patients were discharged. However, based on the English-language way of thinking, the English editor thought that the symptoms were “postoperative”, in that only when there were no symptoms after operation could the patients be discharged. To avoid this problem, the Chinese editor deleted “preoperative”. This kind of error is frequent in English articles translated from Chinese. As mentioned by Cameron,⁴ because the clause structure and other typological characteristics of Chinese differ greatly from those of English, translated English versions may contain some

HUA HE and KE-JIAN GAN are editors at the Chinese Journal of Cancer. Corresponding author: HUA HE, hehuaaylin@gmail.com.

Chinese ways of expression and thus be misinterpreted by editors who do not know Chinese.

Example 2

Original version

“A recent report on corneal endothelitis associated with evidence of cytomegalovirus infection.”

No revisions by the English editor

“A recent report on corneal endothelitis associated with evidence of cytomegalovirus infection.”

Comment from the English editor: “The meaning of this phrase is unclear. Please revise to clarify.”

Edited by a Chinese editor

“A recent report provided evidence that cytomegalovirus infection is associated with corneal endothelitis.”

Our comment: The example came from an article on ocular manifestations in patients with leukemia. The original version is grammatically incorrect and confusing. However, when the Chinese editor translated the original English version word-to-word into Chinese, the author’s intention was understood, and the revisions were made accordingly. This sort of Chinese-to-English translation is hard for native English editors when they are struggling to revise “what often appears to be nonsensical sentences, without changing the authors’ meaning”.⁵

2. Chinese authors can communicate more accurately and efficiently with Chinese editors than can English editors.

It can be much easier to edit an article if the editor can readily obtain and understand explanations and clarifications from the author. Chinese editors who are fluent in English have an advantage over English editors in this regard when communicating with Chinese authors, especially those with relatively poor fluency in English.

Example 1

Original version

“The figure of the positive cell of CD3, CD4 or CD8 were observed through the microscope (the T-lymphocyte which connects with above 3 red blood cell is positive, in all counts above 200), and the percentage of rosette formation cell was calculated.”

Edited by an English editor

“The number of cells positive for CD3, CD4 or CD8 was then observed through a microscope (the T-lymphocyte which connects with above 3 red blood cell is positive, in all counts above 200), and the percentage of rosette formation cells was calculated.”

Edited by a Chinese editor

“The number of cells positive for CD3, CD4 or CD8 was then observed through a microscope; a T-lymphocyte which bonded with more than 3 red cells (rosette formation) was defined as being positive. More than 200 T-lymphocytes were counted, and the percentage of cells with rosette formation was calculated.”

Our comment: The passage describes T-lymphocyte subsets from peripheral blood. The English editor attempted to make the sentence grammatically correct, but the phrase “in all counts above 200” still did not make sense. The English editor requested that the author review, clarify, and rewrite the passage. However, instead of an explanation in English, the author could only manage to respond in Chinese. In this case, the Chinese editor was able to help modify the sentence to express its intended meaning accurately.

Example 2

Original version

“It is also important for food safety monitoring in the market of freshwater fishes, *L. hongkongensis* has become one of the routine pathogens analysis parameters of freshwater fish from Guangdong to Hong Kong is a good evidence.”

No revisions by the English editor

“It is also important for food safety monitoring in the market of freshwater fishes, *L. hongkongensis* has become one of the routine pathogens analysis parameters of freshwater fish from Guangdong to Hong Kong is a good evidence.”

Comments from the English editor: “(1) perhaps specify what ‘it’ refers to. ‘This study’? 2) This sentence is unclear.”

Edited by a Chinese editor

“Since *L. hongkongensis* has become one of the parameters for routine pathogen analysis of freshwater fish imported from Guangdong to Hong Kong, it is recommended that the imported freshwater fish also be monitored in Macao.”

Our comment: In this example, the author studied the prevalence of *L. hongkongensis*, a novel genus and species associated with community-acquired gastroenteritis and traveler’s diarrhea, in retail freshwater fishes in Macao. She wanted to emphasize that because *L. hongkongensis* is a routinely measured pathogen of freshwater fish imported from Guangdong to Hong Kong, it should be monitored by the Food Safety Department in Macao. Although the English editor had a clear sense that the sentence should be rephrased, he did not know how to correct it. Judging from “good evidence”, the Chinese editor understood that the author was using analysis of *L. hongkongensis* in Guangdong and Hong Kong as an example for another location (Macao). After effective communication in Chinese with the author, who was not proficient in English, the Chinese editor corrected the awkward sentence structure and the vague meaning of the original version.

Advantages

Example 3

Original version

“The basophilic epithelial cells became more and more from intraovarian rete, connecting rete to extraovarian rete.”

No revisions by the English editor

“The basophilic epithelial cells became more and more from intraovarian rete, connecting rete to extraovarian rete.”

Comments from the English editor: “The meaning of this sentence is not clear. Do you mean to say that ‘The basophilic epithelial cells continued to differentiate from intraovarian rete to connecting rete, and finally to extraovarian rete’? Or is it the other way around? ‘Basophilic epithelial cells continued to be produced through the differentiation of intraovarian rete, connecting rete and extraovarian rete’? Please review and revise.”

Edited by a Chinese editor

“Basophilic staining was observed with increasing amount from intraovarian rete to connecting rete, to extraovarian rete in epithelial cells.”

Our comment: This article investigated the ultrastructure of ovaries in African ostrich chicks. The English editor felt that the sentence was not clear and drew several inferences. The author was unable to respond to the English editor in English. With the Chinese editor, she could explain that she meant to say “the increased intensity of basophilic staining”, not “the increase of basophilic cells”. After efficient communication with the author in Chinese, the Chinese editor made the changes accordingly.

Example 4

Original version

“These results suggest that the chondrogenic microenvironment has very important effects on the differentiation of BMSC into cartilage cells and the formation of cartilage tissues.”

Edited by an English editor

“These results suggest that the chondrogenic microenvironment is potent in inducing the differentiation of BMSC into cartilage cells and the formation of cartilage tissues.”

Edited by a Chinese editor

“These results suggest that the chondrogenic microenvironment plays an important role in inducing the differentiation of BMSC into cartilage cells and the formation of cartilage tissues.”

Our comment: When the author wrote this sentence, he or she meant that the chondrogenic microenvironment is a constituent factor, but not the only one, that induces the differentiation of BMSC into cartilage cells and the formation of cartilage tissues. The English editor’s revision, although grammatically correct, changes the author’s intended meaning. After communication with the author, the editing produced by the Chinese editor was agreed on.

3. Extensive editing by a Chinese editor is more economical than that performed by an English editor.

It appears that about half the English biomedical articles written by authors from mainland China are originally written in Chinese, and most of these need extensive editing if they are to be published in international English-language journals (personal communication with Harry H X Xia, February 2008). Normally, the fee for such extensive editing by an English editor is US\$50–80 per hour or even more, whereas it is about US\$40–50 per hour when done by a Chinese editor. For the reasons we have listed above, editing of a poorly drafted article would take an English editor much more time and effort than a Chinese editor with equivalent skills. Therefore, even if the two editors charge the author at the same hourly rate, the total cost for an English editor to complete the editing would be much higher than for a Chinese

editor. In practice, the rate charged by a Chinese editor is lower than that of an English editor.

Advantages of Native-English-Speaking Editors

One has to acknowledge the advantages of an English editor over a Chinese editor, such as a greater command and better sense of the English language, richer vocabulary, more flexibility in the use of English, and faster editing if the original version is clear.⁶

Strategies for the Editing of Articles Written by Chinese Authors

We estimate that mistaken editing by English editors due to a lack of understanding of the Chinese language and inadequate communication with Chinese authors occurs in about 5%–30% of articles written by Chinese authors, depending on the author’s command of English writing. On the basis of our experience and the anecdotal examples given, we propose that for Chinese authors, particularly those with a relatively poor command of English, instead of seeking help from an English editor directly, it would be more useful and cost effective to have a Chinese editor assess the accuracy of the translation. When necessary, light editing of an article by an English editor may be applied later to ensure a high standard of language. The combination of extensive editing of an article by a Chinese editor with light editing by an English editor would cost less than extensive editing by an English editor. According to the results of a survey performed by a biomedical English editing company whose editors are mostly senior Chinese scientists and investigators, this approach greatly increases the acceptance of articles submitted by authors from mainland China (personal communication with Harry H X Xia, February 2008). It is also suggested by Li et al⁷ that “in the long run, it is in the interest of ESL authors to receive editorial assistance in their local scholarly community”. With effective

communication between local language professionals, such as a local editing company, and subject professionals, such as the authors' supervisors and peers, authors are more likely to overcome the language barrier and express their academic ideas clearly.⁸ This strategy may also be applied to other ESL writers who have relatively poor English skills. Finally, ESL editing would benefit from constant improvement of ESL editors' English skills and greater familiarity with and understanding of non-English languages by English editors. 

Acknowledgment

We thank Harry H X Xia for his valuable comments, information, and careful review of the manuscript. We also thank Loren Wold for his critical review of the manuscript.

References

1. Gao R, Liao Z, Li ZS. Scientific publications in gastroenterology and hepatology journals from Chinese authors in various parts of North Asia: 10-year survey of literature. *J Gastroenterol Hepatol.* 2008;23(3):374-378.
2. Goh KL, Farrell GC. Publications from China: the sleeping giant awakens. *J Gastroenterol Hepatol.* 2008;23(3):341-343.
3. Lu JX. Scientific publication in China: an overview and some thoughts on improvement. *Sci Ed.* 2004;27(4):120-121.
4. Cameron C. Bridging the gap: working productively with ESL authors. *Sci Ed.* 2007;33(3):43-44.
5. Radcliff J. Scientific editing around the globe: medical editing in Taiwan. *CBE Views.* 1999;22(5):155-156.
6. Flowerdew J. Problems in writing for scholarly publication in English: the case of Hong Kong. *J Sec Lang Writ.* 1999;8(3):243-264.
7. Li Y Y, Flowerdew J. Shaping Chinese novice scientists' manuscripts for publication. *J Sec Lang Writ.* 2007;16(2):100-117.
8. Burrough-Boenisch J. Shapers of published NNS research articles. *J Sec Lang Writ.* 2003;12 (3):223-243.

Call for Abstracts: 2009 CSE Annual Meeting

The 2009 CSE annual meeting, to be held 2–5 May, will include both podium and poster presentations on editorial research. Abstracts of research for potential presentation must be submitted by 1 February. For further information, please see www.councilscienceeditors.org/events/annualmeeting09/abstract_form.cfm.