

Editing of English-Language Manuscripts by Chinese Authors

Although I agree with He and Gan¹ on many points in their article, it is our practice at BioMedES Ltd to involve both Chinese translators *and* editors to help with the conversion of poorly presented papers from the People's Republic of China to ensure that they are improved and have a much better chance of acceptance after peer review. On a number of occasions, we have found that the meaning of a word or a phrase simply cannot be deduced. Chinese scientists are now writing very good papers, and this makes our task a good deal simpler than it was even 1 to 2 years ago. In far fewer than 30% of articles do English editors show a lack of understanding of the Chinese connotation of what has been written. In many of the science articles in which the meaning of some phrase seems unclear initially, reading the sentence in the context of the data supporting the statement can resolve the problem. In a number of services offered in biomedical editing, the staff will often not have sufficient training or backup from expert colleagues (in the subject matter) to understand difficult sentences.

In Section 3 of the article, it was interesting to learn that Chinese editing fees commanded only a little less per hour than US fees—certainly at the bottom of the scales quoted (US\$40 versus US\$50). The charges are about 50% greater than those of BioMedES Ltd. About 30% of our work now comes from China, whereas only 3 to 4 years ago, it amounted to only about 5%.

It was helpful to have the comments of He and Gan, but at present we do not see the issues as creating the problems they report.

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Reference

1. He H, Gan KJ. Advantages of English-fluent Chinese editors over native-English-speaking editors in editing Chinese biomedical manuscripts. *Sci Ed*. 2008;31(6):189–192.

Reply

First of all, I would like to thank Wheatley for sharing his comments and experience with us.

It is great to know that BioMedES Ltd has adopted a practice that involves both Chinese translators *and* (native English) editors. However, it is unclear who the translators are and how the translators and editors work together to help with the conversion of poorly presented papers from the People's Republic of China. If the translators simply translate those manuscripts prepared in Chinese, and the editors copyedit the translated version, then this model may not be called “copyediting”, but “translating and editing”. It should be emphasized that there are hundreds of translation companies in China. However, according to Harry H-X Xia, the president and editor-in-chief of Medjaden Biomedical Services, English manuscripts simply translated from a Chinese version are hardly likely to be accepted by an English journal and are extremely difficult to edit unless the translators are academically trained and capable

of “rewriting” instead of only “translating” the Chinese version into an English one. That is due to differences in presentation between Chinese and English manuscripts and in the way of thinking between Chinese and native English speakers as described in our article.¹

We agree that the overall English level of Chinese scientists has improved substantially, and most Chinese scientists are now writing very good papers. However, because of the authorities' requirements for promotion or graduation, tens of thousands of investigators and postgraduates are struggling to publish scientific articles in journals covered by the Science Citation Index. In 2007, Chinese authors published 94,800 articles in SCI journals, accounting for 7.5% of the worldwide number and ranking third behind the United States and the UK.² It is believed that the numbers of authors and publications will climb rapidly. It is understandable that the percentage of poorly drafted articles sent to editing companies reaches 30%.

Letter

continued

With regard to pricing, we noted that that the current rate of US\$40/hour (about RMB¥280/hour) is acceptable to most Chinese scientists for extensive editing, not copyediting or proofreading. In practice, however, the compensation for qualified native-Chinese-speaking editors of English-language papers by Chinese authors tends to be lower than that rate (and much lower than the normal salaries of the editors). Indeed, most of these editors are associate professors or higher at Western universities, and they do the editing on a volunteer basis in their spare time, because they wish to help their fellow scientists publish their research in English-language journals. We appreciate that BioMedES Ltd provides copyediting at a lower rate for many Chinese scientists and hope that the “translating-and-editing” model produces cost-effective results for both the authors and the company.

Finally, we would like to share with Wheatley the experience from Medjaden that scientific editing or medical writing as a profession is not well recognized in China as in Western countries. Some Chinese authors or even their universities still feel shame in acknowledging that their manuscripts have received professional assistance from an editing company, fearing that they may be regarded as incompetent to do their own work. Fortunately, that situation is changing, albeit slowly and reluctantly, in a few large cities, such as Shanghai and Xi’an.

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2. China Education and Research Network [Internet] [cited 2009 January 29]. Available from: www.edu.cn/xin_wen_gong_gao_1114/20081217/t20081217_347692.shtml.