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Learning the practice of scholarly publication in English – A Romanian perspective



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the range of factors that motivate Romanian researchers to publish in high-profile English-medium journals, the main linguistic and non-linguistic hurdles they have experienced and the strategies they have developed in respect of managing the publication process and improving their abilities to communicate research in English. As shown in the sixteen accounts provided by lecturers in economics and business – followed by four interviews with the respondents who managed to publish in prestigious international journals – linguistic proficiency is one resource in the complex architecture of expertise required for effective research dissemination, alongside methodological versatility, critical writing abilities, awareness of editors' agendas, participation in wider research networks, and learning the practice of writing by more writing. I argue that development of research writing abilities can be better addressed if pedagogical instruments designed to enable researchers to perform this multi-level task are underpinned by the exploration of the wider set of factors that generate the need to write up research in English.

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1. Introduction

Romanian researchers' efforts to access peer-reviewed English language journals resemble the attempts of novice professionals to become accepted members of established communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Experience and prolonged involvement in academia do not seem to matter. As the data reported in this study indicate, many researchers feel like novices in relation to prevailing academic conventions (Swales, 2004). Such conventions have been established and redefined in the process of participation in communities of practice, where participants engage in sharing and negotiating their ways of understanding the world, and in doing so they refine and redefine their practice. Within this view of professional development as fundamentally social and experiential (Candlin & Hyland, 1999; Hyland, 2007, 2011; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Mauranen, 2012), opportunities to contribute to the practice of communities are of the greatest importance. Romanian researchers in the field of business and economics – who are the focus of this study – did not, for a long while, interact with the wider academic community, did not learn from continuous social and professional engagement and did not take part in defining the conventions they now need to comply with. The reasons why that happened are beyond the scope of this study. The result is that we are now 'novice' and inexperienced in relation to the accepted research publication codes and practices of the international community.

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In consequence, there is a wide gap to bridge for academics who try to play by the internationally accepted rules. They want to do so – when motivated by a genuine interest in research – and they have to do so – because of mandatory career advancement institutional requirements. This study sets out to explore the range of factors that motivate Romanian researchers in business and economics to attempt publication in English-medium journals and the main hurdles, linguistic and non-linguistic, they experience in the process. Linguistic difficulties can be better addressed if pedagogical instruments designed to develop research-writing skills of researchers using English as an additional language (EAL) (Flowerdew, 2008) are underpinned by an understanding of the wider set of factors that generate the need to communicate research in English. Within this holistic approach, the data derived from my exploration aim to contribute to the argument that academic texts can be better understood in the context of the socio-political processes in which they are situated (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Salager-Meyer, 2008; Swales, 2004; Turner, 2012), where text features and text-generating practices make a “synergistic spiral” (Turner, 2012, p. 19).

The reality of scholarly publication confirms the status of English as the language of scientific communication. By 1995 (as reported by Amon, 2003, cited in Ferguson, 2007), 82.5% of journal publications in the social sciences (sociology, economics) and 87.2% of publications in the natural sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry, medicine and mathematics) were written in English. More recently, Flowerdew and Li (2009, p. 2) note the existence of disciplinary differences within the dominant trend of “anglicization of academic publishing”, with a more pronounced preference for English language publication in the hard sciences, which have a more universal character, than in the humanities and social sciences where disciplines such as history, literature or politics are more locally relevant. Nevertheless, Flowerdew and Li (2009) discuss a complex picture rather than one displaying clear-cut disciplinary boundaries, a picture that takes into account variables such as the target audience academics aim to engage with and institutional policies. Indeed, thirteen of the sixteen journals in the field of economics published by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, where this study is located, require submissions in English only, one publishes bilingual articles (English and Romanian) and two accept a wider range of languages – English, French, Italian and German.

Writing for international publication involves a lot more than writing accurate English and observing a certain structural pattern. Research reporting conventions are underpinned by a set of practices in conducting research and creating knowledge. Therefore, language proficiency should be accompanied by a whole range of competences pertaining to research planning, choice and use of appropriate methodological tools, critical writing, rhetorical awareness and constant practising of research writing. Such insights have emerged from the practice of training professional researchers in the field of economics and business within the framework of an MA programme in academic practice at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies where I work. The perceptions of participants in this programme about the factors that generate the need to write and publish in English as well as about their personal approach to improving their research-writing abilities are communicated in this study.

1.1. The linguistic and non-linguistic challenges of international publication

A large body of research has explored the development of second and foreign language academic writing skills of EAL researchers, together with perceptions about the challenges of disseminating research through the medium of English (Buckingham, 2008, 2013; Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008; Flowerdew, 1999; Huang, 2010; Lillis & Curry, 2006; Moreno, Rey-Rocha, Burgess, López-Navarro, & Sachdev, 2012; Perez-Llantada, Plo, & Ferguson, 2011). Such studies have analysed primarily linguistic and textual difficulties scholars face in their attempt to communicate their research results to the international academic community. Other studies have looked at the contextual factors – cultural, economic, political as well as linguistic – that adversely affect dissemination of researchers’ work and consequently their international visibility (Curry & Lillis, 2010; Flowerdew, 2008; Salager-Meyer, 2008, 2013). As Flowerdew (1999) pointed out in his study of problems encountered by Hong Kong writers, the complex array of factors that impact on publication success need to be explored from the perspectives of individual scholars who can reflect both on their own efforts and on the institutional context in which they operate.

A useful review of 39 studies on multilingual scholars’ participation in global communities (Uzuner, 2008) reveals a range of challenges such scholars face. English language difficulties are accompanied by parochialism, inability to show the relevance of research, divergence from accepted research-reporting conventions, isolation from academic networks, insufficient research funding and unfair treatment by editors and reviewers. If one looks at the wider set of factors that affect international publication, it becomes apparent that the individual and institutional agendas are closely interconnected: academic institutions wish to strengthen their international profile in order to fare better in a highly competitive market and benefit from academics’ efforts to become internationally visible (while putting pressure on them to become visible). Researchers may be driven by their genuine interest in research as well as by institutional pressure and career advancement plans. Whatever the situation may be in each individual case, the personal and institutional agendas influence each other and generate responsibilities for both parties. As Hyland and Hamp-Lyons note (2002, p. 4), the expectations are aligned to the international norms but tend to ignore the needs for support that derive from such alignment. All responsibility seems to lie with individuals who need to carry on their own battle, and to find their own channels, networks and resources in order to become internationally more visible. However, provision of training has been identified as the remit of educational and national authorities, with such provision ranging from the English language education of researchers (Salager-Meyer, 2008, p. 124) to programmes that train international scholars “to perform to adequate levels in their individual fields” (Flowerdew, 2013, p. 9).

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