



# “Convenience Editing” in action: Comparing English teachers’ and medical professionals’ revisions of a medical abstract

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## ABSTRACT

Native English-speaking (NES) English teachers at universities in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts are sometimes asked to edit English manuscripts written by non-native English-speaking (NNES) colleagues in scientific fields. However, professional peers may differ from English teachers in their approach towards editing scientific manuscripts (Benfield & Howard, 2000). This study examined (1) editing strategies used by NES English teachers at Japanese universities with different amounts of medical editing experience, compared to those used by NES healthcare professionals in editing an abstract written by a Japanese medical researcher; (2) points where participants felt the need to consult with the abstract’s author; (3) revisions affecting definite articles; and (4) editors’ attitudes towards editing. Results reveal that disciplinary knowledge and medical editing experience did not significantly impact editing strategies, but did impact the number of points where consultation was considered necessary, as well as revisions affecting definite articles. English teachers’ ambivalence towards editing was also revealed. We argue that greater collaboration between English teachers and researchers in scientific fields is needed, and that consultation and clarity should become themes in courses designed for graduate and undergraduate EFL students.

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## 1. Introduction

The need to produce scientific research articles in English has been found to be a significant burden for non-native English-speaking (NNES) authors (Belcher, 2007; Curry & Lillis, 2004)—even a statistically significant burden (Hanauer & Englander, 2011). Adding to this burden, English-language academic journals in scientific fields often require that NNES authors have a native English speaker (NES) view their manuscripts before submission (Li & Flowerdew, 2007). Even authors who choose to write in languages other than English often cannot escape stringent English-language standards. Many Japanese journals, for instance, require “native checks” for English abstracts accompanying Japanese-language submissions. NNES authors in EFL contexts may consult one of a variety of “literacy brokers” (Lillis & Curry, 2006) or “shapers” (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003) to improve the language quality of their manuscripts. For instance, professional translation and editing services are available that guarantee manuscripts will be edited by a NES disciplinary peer. However, these services are often expensive (Salager-Meyer, 2008). Moreover, authors are sometimes uncertain about the accuracy of the finished work (Huang, 2010).

These literacy brokers also include English teachers (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Lillis & Curry, 2006, 2010a). These teachers may be consulted not because they are believed to possess editing expertise, but simply because they happen to be the

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E-mail addresses: [ianwill@cc.kagawa-u.ac.jp](mailto:ianwill@cc.kagawa-u.ac.jp), [iwilley@hotmail.com](mailto:iwilley@hotmail.com) (I. Willey), [kimie@med.kagawa-u.ac.jp](mailto:kimie@med.kagawa-u.ac.jp) (K. Tanimoto).

only native English speakers “for miles around” (van Naerssen & Eastwood, 2001, p. 3). The authors of this paper have come to refer to such English-teaching editors as “convenience editors,” as they are a convenient (and perhaps cost-free) choice for authors.

However, English teachers may experience difficulties when editing scientific manuscripts. One problem is that the terminology and rhetorical features of scientific manuscripts are likely unfamiliar to English teachers (Spack, 1988). These teachers may misunderstand, for instance, the communicative purposes of genres in specific disciplines, and make inappropriate revisions (Swales, 1990, pp. 72–73). English teachers and disciplinary peers may also differ in their approach towards revisions. Benfield and Howard (2000) found that an English teacher tended to focus on problems of form and presentation when editing medical texts, while peers focused on content and wording. Correct article usage was also a greater concern to the teacher than to the peers.

Other constraints may work against the efficacy of convenience editing. For instance, English teachers living in EFL contexts may suffer from attrition of their English skills, or be unable to identify not-native usages as “errors” (Porte, 1999). Ethical issues such as notions of text ownership and appropriation may also cause some English teachers to limit their level of interference, and avoid extensive revisions (see Tardy, 2006). Harwood, Austin, and Macaulay (2010) found that such ethical concerns were held by student proofreaders at a university in the U.K. Moreover, busy schedules may prevent authors from meeting with English teachers to discuss manuscripts, forcing the teachers to struggle with uncertainty while editing (Li & Flowerdew, 2007). In short, these English teachers are not professional “authors’ editors” (Burrough-Boenisch, 2006), and editing requests can be a stressful burden.

As a result, some English teachers may reduce the time and labor involved in editing by *satisficing*, that is, correcting obvious errors, such as in preposition usage, while ignoring more complex concerns (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003). “Cleaning up” superficial errors, however, may be unnecessary, as journal editors have been found to be understanding of language difficulties faced by NNES authors (King & Shohamy, 2010), and to be concerned more with the content of a submission than native-like perfection (Flowerdew, 2001; Iverson, 2002)—although evidence that editors and reviewers can be harsh on the language quality of manuscripts written by NNES authors has also been found (e.g., Flowerdew, 2000).

The subject of editing done by literacy brokers in general, and English teachers in particular, has not been substantially investigated in the applied linguistics field. This study emerged from a desire to explore how English teachers’ revisions differ from those of healthcare professionals, as well as these teachers’ attitudes towards their literacy broker role.

## 2. Approach

### 2.1. Theoretical grounding

Flower, Hayes, Carey, Schriver, and Stratman (1986) have posited that revision requires a reviser to execute several cognitive processes, including the ability to detect errors, diagnose problems, and select appropriate revision strategies. Flower et al. (1986) drew a distinction between *revision* and *rewriting*; revisers who choose to *rewrite* take the gist of a passage and create new text, either by redrafting the text or paraphrasing at the sentence level. In contrast, *revision* is guided by diagnosis of a well-defined problem, and utilizes specific revision strategies (for example, by adding an article) to resolve the problem. Specific revision strategies have been identified in a number of studies (e.g., Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2001; Sommers, 1980), and include such categories as deletion, substitution, and reordering.

According to Flower et al.’s (1986) model, a reviser of a self-written text, when confronted with a problem in this text, essentially has four options: to revise, to rewrite, to delay action (and perhaps search for a solution), or to ignore the problem and do nothing. However, editing is typically done by someone to a text produced by someone else (Haugen, 1990), and editors thus have another option: consulting the author. Editors can do this by indicating a problem and deferring responsibility to the author (Bisaillon, 2007), or by consulting the author directly in order to find a resolution (Burrough-Boenisch, 2006).

Following Flower et al.’s (1986) cognitive process model, we set out to examine specific strategies employed by native English speakers in editing a medical abstract. We also sought to identify instances where editors would opt to take the strategic route of consultation with the author in order to make a revision, as it was suspected that these points would decrease as an editor gains discipline-specific editing experience.

### 2.2. Research questions

Two questions guided this study:

1. Do NES English teachers at Japanese universities and NES healthcare professionals differ in their selection of editing strategies when editing an English medical abstract?
2. Does amount of experience editing healthcare-related manuscripts affect editing strategies employed by NES English teachers when editing an English medical abstract?

These two questions were also asked for points where consultation with the author was felt necessary as well as for revisions affecting definite article use. Revisions affecting definite articles were examined because of Benfield and Howard’s

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