

Publishing and learning writing for publication in English: Perspectives of NNES PhD students in science

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Abstract

Publication in international journals has become a prerequisite to PhD graduation. This study thus provides a framework for understanding the learning of writing skills and publishing practices of nonnative English-speaking PhD students by investigating their perceptions of publishing and learning to write for publication. Findings show that these students regard themselves as disadvantaged due to their limited proficiency in English. However, many of them are not motivated to remedy the situation due to (1) their opinion that English plays only a secondary role in scientific research, (2) their lack of confidence in the writing curricula, and (3) their perspectives on the imbalanced power relations between them and their advisers. This framework offers an important insight: The nonnative English-speaking PhD students' disinclination to learn to write for publication is influenced by many factors other than perceived language incompetence. To empower and motivate prospective NNES scholars, the study offers several suggestions to journal gatekeepers, EAP professionals, and academic advisers.

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1. Introduction

Since English is the dominant medium of international academic journals and publication in journals a main criterion of scholars' academic achievement, researchers have investigated the challenges faced by NNES (nonnative English-speaking) scholars in peripheral countries, from different facets (e.g., Braine, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 2008).¹ The first facet relates to the written products and publication outcomes. Analyzing the textual similarities and differences between articles written by NES (native English-speaking) and NNES scholars, these studies suggest that variation (if any) may result from cultural preferences or the textbooks from which NNES writers have learned (Cmejrková & Daneš, 1997; McEnery & Kifle, 2002; Melander, Swales, & Fredrickson, 1997; Yakhontova, 2002). However, some disparities in writing might be regarded as the NNES scholars' language deficiency, causing them to fall short of the reviewers' expectations (Curry & Lillis, 2004). Studies which investigate the publication rate of

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¹ Kachru (1985) categorizes countries into three circles in terms of the use of English: the inner circle (e.g., U.S.), the outer circle (e.g., Singapore), and the expanding circle (e.g., Taiwan). Based on Kachru's categories, I define the countries in the outer circle and the expanding circle as "the periphery" and refer to the countries in the inner circle as "the center."

countries show a disproportionately higher contribution from central countries compared to that of peripheral countries (Benfield & Howard, 2000; King, 2004; Link, 1998). The reasons for the disproportion, as Man, Weinkauff, Tsang, and Sin (2004) suggest, are English proficiency and national research spending, which are significantly correlated with journal publication rate. In other words, not only the lack of English ability but also nonlanguage-related problems can hinder NNES scholars' success in publication (Canagarajah, 1996, 2002).

Other studies exploring the process of writing for publication specifically examine how NNES scholars have coped with challenges and how different professionals have revised the papers for them (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Flowerdew, 2000; Gosden, 1995; Li, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2006). The results reveal that, to overcome difficulties in writing, NNES scholars often resort to published texts and the help of professionals, such as disciplinary or language experts. In addition to journal gatekeepers, these experts seem to play a significant role in shaping NNES manuscripts.

Still other studies seek to understand NNES scholars' publishing practices from the perspective of the participants involved in the publishing process. On behalf of journal gatekeepers, Mišak, Marušić, and Marušić (2005) identify a variety of language problems commonly found in NNES manuscripts and offer suggestions to mitigate the problems. Similarly, most of the journal editors in Flowerdew (2001) show understanding and sympathy for the challenges faced by NNES scholars. Journal reviewers' comments and revisions are also examined by researchers. For example, Gosden (2001, 2003) analyzes both reviewers' comments and the corresponding replies of NNES authors, and suggests that NNES scholars should be taught to interpret and make appropriate correspondences. Benfield and Feak (2006) present the different effects of revisions made by language and disciplinary professionals.

On the other hand, some studies probe the perceptions of NNES scholars (Cho, 2004; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Flowerdew, 1999a, 1999b; Tardy, 2004). Research on this aspect reveals that NNES scholars regard English as the most important language for publication. Nonetheless, the scholars' lack of English proficiency subjects them to great pressure and contributes to their perception of being disadvantaged.

In general, previous literature has described how particularly demanding it is for peripheral NNES scholars to publish in English (see an exception, Wood, 2001). The challenges can be either discursive (language-related) or nondiscursive (nonlanguage-related) (Ferguson, 2007). The difficulty in meeting the standards of international journals tends to put NNES scholars at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their NES counterparts when they compete for publication space.

Inexperienced NNES scholars might find it even tougher to publish in English journals, as unfamiliarity with the language is compounded by their novice status. Research focusing on novice NNES scholars who are pursuing or have just finished their PhD degree has uncovered the challenges and problems they encounter throughout the publishing process (Casanave, 1998; Cho, 2004; Flowerdew, 2000; Li, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Tardy, 2004). For example, Casanave (1998) shows that novice Japanese scholars face twofold pressure: On the one hand, they need to publish in English to gain recognition in the international community; on the other, they also have to publish in Japanese to establish local networks. Furthermore, when scrutinizing the publishing practices of NNES PhD students from China and Hong Kong, Li (2006a, 2006b, 2007) and Li and Flowerdew (2007) discover that, being unfamiliar with conventions of publication, these students tend to borrow textual structures from published articles, focus on "hot issues," and conform to the revisions made by professors and language professionals.

Other studies, drawing on interviews and questionnaires, ask NNES PhD students about their standpoints on journal publication; the students' replies somewhat confirm the results stated above (Cho, 2004; Li, 2002; Tardy, 2004). Almost all the participants refer to language problems as additional obstacles to publication, regardless of the contexts in which they are situated. However, NNES PhD students in the U.S. seem more confident than those in peripheral countries, mainly because of their close connection to center scholars (e.g., being able to co-author with an NES scholar) (Cho, 2004; Tardy, 2004). Unlike the NNES PhD students who have more access to NES scholars, the students in China admit that they lag in the English language, although they are generally confident about having their manuscripts published (Li, 2002). In sum, the interplay of the pressure of publishing in English, the perceived high standard of writing quality which seems difficult to meet, and the perceived disconnected position causes the NNES scholars to feel disadvantaged (Curry & Lillis, 2004; Flowerdew, 1999a, 1999b).

These studies have contributed to the knowledge of the additional challenges faced by NNES PhD students who seek publication; overlooked, however, is the direct impact of university curricula and advisers on these students' learning to write for publication. Although previous research examines the strategies applied by PhD students during the publishing process, it seldom looks into the writing curricula provided by universities. For instance, Li (2006a, 2006b, 2007) conducts a series of studies on the challenges encountered and the strategies used by Chinese PhD

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