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Chinese academics writing for publication: English teachers as text mediators



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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a key aspect of Chinese scholars writing for publication in English: the role played by local English teachers as literacy brokers or “text mediators”. Increasingly, academics in China are required to publish their research in prestigious international journals to progress their careers, and are turning to local English teaching colleagues for assistance. The expense, uncertain competence and sometimes dubious ethical practices of professional editing services, combined with the co-present contact and personal relationships formed with local colleagues, mean that Chinese English teachers are rapidly becoming a valuable resource for turning the massive number of Chinese submissions into publishable papers. This relationship, however, is complicated by the lack of institutional funding for language mediation of this kind and by the uncertainties of appropriate reward for this work. This paper examines the kinds of cooperation and difficulties experienced between local English teachers and scientists in some Chinese universities.

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1. Chinese academics: publishing imperatives and obstacles

The imperative for academics to publish in internationally indexed English language journals has made itself felt in almost all corners of the world, and China is no exception. Chinese scholars increasingly find their career opportunities depend on their ability to publish in high profile English language journals indexed in the *Web of Knowledge* science citation index (SCI).

China's contribution to the global output of published papers has, as a result, grown massively in recent years. An analysis of the 3 million plus submissions to 4,200 journals received through the manuscript processing system *ScholarOne* between 2005 and 2010, for example, shows that submissions from China increased by 484% (Thomson Reuters, 2012). Over the last decade, in fact, China increased its world share of submission by 5.5%, advancing it from 14th to 5th in world output (Hyland, 2015). Recent figures from *SCImago* (2014) show China just behind the US in submissions and it leads the number of papers in the engineering index. In 2014 alone, academics in China published some 263,500 SCI-indexed articles, accounting for 14.9% of the world total, up from less than 50,000 in 2001 (ISTIC, 2015).

These increases reflect the significant investment China is making in funding research and the fact that several universities in China are working to attain “world-class university” status through a significant beefing up of their publication productivity. As a result, many universities are offering monetary rewards to encourage academics to publish in

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international journals, such that inducements of GBP 20,000 for acceptance in *Science* or *Nature* are not unknown (Shao & Shen, 2011). These pressures have also led some researchers to engage in unethical practices, and cases of fraud, plagiarism, and “ghost authoring” have been widely documented (e.g., Hvistendahl, 2013; Zhang, 2010).

Despite China’s emergence as a major player in international publishing, writing in English often poses considerable challenge to many Chinese authors. This means that it trails the traditional publishing nations in both acceptance and citation rates. So while acceptances for submissions from the United States, Germany, Australia, the U.K., and Canada remained at around 50% of submissions between 2005 and 2010, China’s massive increase in submissions produced no appreciable increase in acceptance rates, which remained at around 26% (Thomson Reuters, 2012). Similarly, published papers by Chinese authors have attracted fewer citations than those from traditional publication nations and remain below world averages in citation counts due to the low visibility of journals in which they often publish (Fu, Frietsch, & Tagscherer, 2013; ISTIC, 2015).

There are several possible reasons why submitted manuscripts from China fail to become published papers and receive fewer citations. While the unfamiliarity of publishing practices and lack of institutional support are likely to play a big role, the challenge presented by academic writing in English is obviously a key obstacle. Ehara and Takahashi (2007), for example, found that language problems were a major reason for rejecting Chinese submissions to a leading international medical journal which often encourages Chinese scientists to submit their papers to low impact SCI-indexed journals (Fu et al., 2013). As a result of these imperatives and obstacles, Chinese scientists often turn to those around them for help.

2. Literacy brokers and text mediators

The term “literacy brokers” was coined by Lillis and Curry (2010, p. 88) to refer to “all the different kinds of direct intervention by different people, other than named authors, in the production of texts.” They have also been referred to as translators, correctors, revisers, local editors, language professionals, language service providers, authors’ editors (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003), proofreaders (Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2009), article shapers (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Li & Flowerdew, 2007), and convenience editors (Willey & Tanimoto, 2012, 2013). While not wishing to add to this plethora of terms, we prefer “text mediators” as it describes a range of possible activities without the negative connotations of a commercial, strictly corporate relationship implied by “broker.” While we understand Lillis and Curry’s desire to refer to the “academic capital” gained from the work, this metaphor fails to capture the collaborative and typically collegial nature of our teacher-academics dyads. Indeed, it overlooks the ethical dimensions of the relationship altogether, particularly the publishing credit which might be given to the mediator.

Drawing from the notion of “mediated authorship” (Prior, 1998, p. 159), we call the English teachers who have worked on scientific research article manuscripts *mediators*. By *mediators* we highlight the role of university English teachers in seeking to work with authors to negotiate a safe passage for their papers through the review process, making direct textual interventions by way of corrections, changes, or suggestions in texts for publication.

While interviews with editors and studies of reviewers’ comments tend to find no undue attention to language in editorial decisions (e.g., Belcher, 2007; Coniam, 2012), critical comments on language, style, or rhetorical conventions are frequently included in reviews (Mungra & Webber, 2010; Mur Dueñas, 2012). Often reviewers lack a metalanguage to discuss rhetorical problems and tend to blame the writer’s poor English (e.g., Kerans, 2001) while some editors insist on having submissions vetted by native English speakers (NESs) at the author’s expense. Such admonishments, however, presuppose that native English speakers are locally accessible and willing to help, although this is not always the case in many Chinese cities (Li & Flowerdew, 2007). More seriously, it assumes that editors are qualified automatically by their nativeness in English to edit academic papers.

3. Non-native English speakers and non-specialists as mediators

Fortunately, both manuscript editors and authors in the hard sciences have begun to realize the problematic nature of this native/non-native dichotomy which unfairly privileges NESs over NNEs as text mediators. The Society of English-Native-Speaking Editors (SENSE) in The Netherlands, for example, despite its name, admitted NNEs editors as associate members at its outset in the 1990s and has recently voted against distinguishing between these categories, while the more recently inaugurated Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) also includes both NES and NNEs members. Similarly, Willey and Tanimoto (2012, 2013), after initially excluding NNEs editors from their study of convenience editorial services for Japanese healthcare professionals, have more recently admitted that “scientific editing is also done by EAL¹ language professionals” (Willey & Tanimoto, 2015, p. 66).

While we acknowledge that differences exist between NESs and NNEs due to their first language background and prior experiences, there are difficulties in framing linguistic disadvantage in terms of a native/non-native divide (Davies, 2003; Hyland, 2015, 2016). NESs, in fact, may lack the necessary familiarity with the rhetorical conventions of the author’s field and so fail to “merit author’s trust and payment” (Benfield & Feak, 2006, p. 1730). The features of academic writing can cause difficulties for both native and non-native English-speakers, and the former are often less “academically bilingual” than

¹ EAL stands for English as an additional language.

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