



Peer-to-peer prescriptions in medical sciences: Iranian field specialists' attitudes toward convenience editing



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ABSTRACT

For many non-native speakers, publishing in English is a demanding task requiring a high standard of academic English proficiency to meet the stringent criteria of accredited journals. In many cases, the meticulous editing of manuscripts is delegated to fellow academics in the same disciplines, who act as peer convenience editors. In an attempt to understand these editors' perceptions of their scaffolding services for their less proficient peers, this qualitative study explores Iranian medical specialist convenience editors' attitudes toward editing for colleagues in the medical sciences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 peer convenience editors, whose experience ranged from 3 to 17 years, to identify their beliefs, experiences, challenges, and suggestions regarding convenience editing. We drew upon emergent methodology to group the interviewees' value-laden comments into five major attitudinal categories: language, the editing task, occupational and technological issues, publication in English, and co-convenience editing. This study revealed that there is a low level of communication between English as a Foreign Language teachers and medical field specialists, two key groups of pre-publication text shapers in Iran. However, their collaboration, according to the findings, could be instrumental for the timely dissemination of research conducted by Iranian scholars in international journals.

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1. Introduction

English is the international medium of publication and conferences in the medical sciences throughout the world (Taavitsainen & Pahta, 2003; Tardy, 2004). As Duszak and Lewkowicz (2008) posit, utilizing English for global publication may enhance the networking and circulation of new ideas. At the same time, the choice of English can be viewed from two opposite perspectives. On the positive side, publishing research articles (RAs) in English is a way to increase international recognition of scholarly work and reach a wider audience. On the negative side, it is a burden to scholars whose first language is not English.

Even non-native English speakers (NNESs) who are competent writers in English face challenges to succeed in publishing their research in English. Once a scholar acquires a working academic writing proficiency in English, s/he has to meet the strict review criteria of a journal to publish her/his research output (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003). As gatekeepers, journal editors and reviewers enforce rigid standards in reviewing manuscripts (MSs). In addition to meeting the standards for quality research,

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NNES authors may also be expected to have their MSs proofread by native-English speakers (NESs) prior to submission (Li & Flowerdew, 2007) or in the process of reviewing, which may further exacerbate publication difficulties for them. While this added layer of review may be feasible in countries where authors have easy access to NES, in countries such as Iran with limited access to NESs, the native speaker proofreading stipulation may be impossible to meet. As Shashok and Handjani (2010) assert, in Iran, in particular, the ongoing political tension and crippling sanctions have compounded Iranian scholars' publishing difficulties and have dramatically limited their access to reference materials, journal databases, and learning tools, although Iran enjoys a well-developed, long-established university system, and a dynamic academic community. Given the obstacles that NNES face in their efforts to publish, they often seek assistance from other NNES. This has recently led to a growing body of research studies investigating how different groups play facilitative roles in the publication of research articles by NNES.

Publication facilitators have been referred to by different names and labels such as 'text shapers' (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003), 'literacy brokers' (Lillis & Curry, 2006), or 'convenience editors' (Willey & Tanimoto, 2012). Text shapers include revisers, correctors, language professionals, language service providers, local editors, and authors' editors (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003). According to Lillis and Curry (2006), literacy brokers consist of academic professionals, language professionals, and non-professionals. In this paper, we use two terms: 'text shaper' and 'convenience editor', following Burrough-Boenisch (2003) and Willey and Tanimoto (2012), respectively.

In many non-English speaking countries, such as Iran, there are two predominant text shapers for author-researchers, namely English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and field specialists with a high proficiency in English. In an early paper, Willey and Tanimoto (2012) considered any sort of editing done by EFL teachers to be 'convenience editing (CE)' since these teachers are in many cases easily accessible and are thought to have the linguistic resources to help researchers get their papers published. Later, Willey and Tanimoto (2015) defined convenience editors more specifically to be "English teachers, often but not always native English speakers, without training in editing or scientific fields, who correct manuscripts mainly as an unpaid favor to their colleagues" (p. 64). While convenience editors include English teachers, they can also be authors' colleagues or similar figures with a native-like or even native command of English, but who may have no formal editing training. The term 'convenience' in convenience editors underlines the fact that these people happen to be conveniently at hand and can be called upon to assist the author. They are not professional editors, nor are they members of editing organizations. Therefore, these convenience editors need to be distinguished from the growing number of professional editors and translators, some of whom even hold doctorates in the scientific field in which they edit and offer commercial editing services through their registered companies or publishers.

Willey and Tanimoto (2012) considered EFL teachers in Japan to be convenience editors who provide assistance to medical doctors in that setting. Similarly, Luo and Hyland (2016) investigated the facilitative role Chinese EFL teachers play in making NNES scientists' manuscripts publishable. According to these researchers, English teachers are valuable resources in China for scientists who seek publication. We build upon these works in the present study, subscribing to the same definition of CE and focusing on medical field specialists in Iran with a good, albeit not native-command of English, whose peers can be called upon for editorial help. Given our interest in peer-to-peer editing, we exclude EFL teachers.

2. Convenience editing

Despite its widespread practice, professional editing (Bisaillon, 2007) as well as convenience editing (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Willey & Tanimoto, 2015) have not yet gained a solid agreed-upon theoretical foundation. Bisaillon (2007) and Willey and Tanimoto (2012, 2013, 2015) have tried to explain CE practices through the Flower, Hayes, Carey, Schriver, and Stratman's (1986) cognitive process model of revision, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation. Adding to these theoretical lenses, here we attribute CE to scaffolding and constructive feedback (CF). Since publishing in journals is a socially constructed venture, it requires a considerable amount of interaction and co-construction among researchers, text shapers, and then journal editors/reviewers. In CE, expert colleagues as text shapers provide language assistance for their novice or less proficient counterparts who are pursuing publication of their research in English. This relationship is in principle known as scaffolding in sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Vygotsky, 1987). Specifically, scaffolding can be defined as a process "through which assistance is provided from person to person such that an interlocutor is enabled to do something she or he might not have been able to do otherwise" (Ohta, 2000, p. 52).

In addition to being clearly linked to scaffolding, CE is also closely related to the notion of CF in that it is aimed at improving a written text, while no criticism is levied on the author of that text (Pourmandnia & Behfrouz, 2014). As maintained by Overall and Sangster (2006, p. 123), "giving constructive formative feedback carries the implication that there will be information available which helps to improve one's work". While complementing other theoretical bases of CE, we believe that scaffolding theory and constructive feedback can offer some interesting insights into this practice.

Like the issues surrounding its theoretical foundations, CE has only slowly begun to receive researchers' attention, and the research exploring its multiple aspects is limited. However, there has been growing interest in exploring CE practices of different text shapers in recent years. Central figures investigating CE are Willey and Tanimoto (2012). Their 2012 study compared the editing tasks of four groups of convenience editors: EFL teachers (both novice and experienced), medical professionals and individuals not engaged in either English language teaching or medicine. The practices of these very different convenience editors were analyzed in terms of implementing editing strategies on English abstracts of medical papers. Their findings revealed that the strategies of substitution, deletion, and addition were the most common among all groups.

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