Journal of English for Academic Purposes 33 (2018) 40–52

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

"Specially in the last years…": Evidence of ELF and non-native English forms in international journals

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 29 August 2017
Received in revised form 12 January 2018
Accepted 24 January 2018

ABSTRACT

While the number of research articles written by non-native speakers of English and published in English-medium international journals is on the rise, little is known about the extent to which that trend may be affecting the way in which English is used in that genre. To address this gap, a corpus comprising 192 non-native English articles published in 8 different international journals, spanning two different time periods (2000–2005 and 2010–2015), was compared with a parallel native-speaker corpus from the same journals and of the exact same characteristics. Analysis of the various word and phrase lists generated by the corpora show that there are a number of lexical items used by non-native authors that are used significantly less by native speakers — if at all. The identified items were shown to be used by several different nationalities, and consistently attested in the majority of the journals sampled. Moreover, comparison between the two time periods reveals that all items have become increasingly accepted over the years. It is concluded that this exploratory study merely scratches the surface in terms of the extent of ELF that may be present in international academic publication. Directions for future research are suggested.

1. Introduction

For some years now, a sort of paradox has existed in global academic publication: while most research is published in the English language (Hyland, 2015), a large proportion of the academic world is not comprised of native speakers of English. It should therefore come as no surprise that much has been written about issues inherent to that paradox, in particular concerning possible disadvantages suffered by non-natives. For example, Hanauer and Englander (2011) surveyed scientists in Mexico and found that they shouldered an additional "burden" when writing their research in English, further asserting that this extra burden was above and beyond the challenge of learning to write to the conventions of the research article (henceforth, RA) genre (cf. Swales, 2004). By contrast, Römer (2009) compared the unpublished non-expert academic English writing of both native (American) and non-native (German) university students with a corpus of published RA writing, and found that "when we deal with advanced-level academic writing, we actually move beyond the native/non-native distinction and that, in this context, experience or expertise is a more important aspect to consider than nativeness" (p. 99). Furthermore, it has been suggested that non-native writers can suffer a kind of "stigma" when identified as not being native speakers of English (Flowerdew, 2008), which, according to Flowerdew, may occur when an author uses a linguistic form in a manuscript

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2018.01.007
1475-1585/

that appears to deviate from putative native norms. Indeed, there is some anecdotal/case-study evidence that would support this notion (Flowerdew & Wang, 2016; Heng Hartse & Kubota, 2014; Hewings, 2006). It is difficult, however, to establish any direct causal effect between non-native English forms and the rejection of an article. A journal may, after all, decide to reject a manuscript for any number of reasons (e.g. Ahlstrom, 2012; Sullivan, 2002), and if language is identified as non-native and negatively affecting the article, then it is also nearly impossible to disentangle the extent to which that language may be responsible for its ultimate rejection among a spectrum of other common contributing factors, such as faulty statistics (Bordage, 2001), poor study design (Pierson, 2012) and lack of knowledge of the literature (Belcher, 2007).

On the other hand, there is evidence that language alone may be somewhat of a "red herring" when it comes to manuscript rejection. Gosden (1992), for example, surveyed 154 journal editors concerning their beliefs and practices with respect to manuscripts written by researchers for whom English is an additional language (henceforth, EAL). According to Gosden, the editors tended to concur that "acceptance or rejection of a manuscript is primarily based on scientific merit" (p. 129), though he also reports that what is perceived as "poor" language may ultimately tip the scales when the paper is seen to possess other important flaws. Indeed, in his exploration of the attitudes of applied linguistics journal editors towards EAL contributions, Flowerdew (2001) found that many of his participants explicitly expressed an awareness and acceptance of non-native English linguistic forms. Any other non-linguistic "problems," according to Flowerdew, "also applied to (native speakers), especially those who were beginning their publishing career" (p. 145). Similarly, Belcher (2007) in her in-depth analysis of manuscripts submitted from "off-network" EAL authors (i.e. from places with relatively limited resources and power) concluded that manuscripts "authored by (native) or (non-native) scholars, networked or off-networked, share many of the same shortcomings" (p. 18).

There has been some limited research that has looked specifically at the linguistic differences between published native-English RAs and EAL RAs (henceforth, NERAs and EALRAs, respectively) (e.g. Kourilova-Urbanczik, 2012; Pan, Reppen, & Biber, 2016; Pérez-Llantada, 2014), but with few exceptions, such analyses have typically presented those comparisons presupposing a "deficiency model" of non-native academic writing (Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2016, p. 49), with differences found in EALRAs framed as "deviation," "underuse," "overuse," and "misuse" relative to inner circle (Bolton & Kachru, 2006) varieties of English. However, a question can be raised regarding the validity of depicting differences in EALRAs as somehow deficient since, after all, they are found in articles that have in fact been published —and by that measure, at least, are equally successful as their NERA counterparts. Arguably, a more useful perspective might be that of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), since ELF provides for the notion that "English is being shaped at least as much by its non-native speakers as by its native speakers" (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339). In such a light, what were previously seen as "deviations" from NERA discourse might instead be seen as contributing to the ongoing development of the language used in the RA genre. Mauranen et al. (2016) state plainly that "(w)riting for academic publishing in English is in effect now writing in English as a lingua franca," potentially giving rise to "a language form that arises out of cross-cultural collaborations," thus adapting "in lexis and structure" (p. 50).

To date, only one author has looked at the RA genre from such a perspective.[1] Lorés-Sanz (2016) sampled 66 article abstracts from one social science journal to examine any evolving changes in rhetorical structure, and found that, indeed, there seems to be an emerging complexity present in the abstracts of that journal as an apparent result of increasing non-native participation over the years. However, to the extent of this author's knowledge, no research so far has looked at the possible emergence of ELF in the actual published articles themselves (as opposed to abstracts alone). Furthermore, there have heretofore been no studies published that explored ELF in EALRAs from a lexical perspective, that is, possible differences in the word and phrase choices from non-native-authored articles. Hyland (2016) has pointed out that the success rate of non-native English scholars has actually increased over time (listed as first author in 38.8% of journals sampled in 2000 versus 56.7% in 2011), but we do not yet know if that increase is also reflected in the language used in those articles. In order to address these gaps, the following questions guided the present exploratory corpus-based study:

RQ 1: Is there evidence of non-native ELF vocabulary in research articles (RAs) published in international journals?
RQ 2: How generalizable is the evidence of ELF in published RAs?
RQ 3: Is there evidence of an emerging trend of increasing acceptance of non-native forms in RAs?

2. Method

2.1. The corpus

As noted in McEnery, Xiao, and Tono (2006), when compiling a corpus, one key element that can affect the validity of its use, analysis and interpretation is the notion of *representativeness*. Representativeness in corpus studies can be defined as the extent to which the texts collected for the corpus can be said to represent the whole of a population:

[1] There have been other published studies that compare non-native to native RA discourse. For example, Hirano (2009) analyzed Brazilian RA introductions in comparison to those written by native English speakers, and Pérez-Llantada (2014) looked into the use of formulaic language used by Spanish authors as compared to natives. Such studies, though interesting, are not usually written from an ELF perspective, but more from a contrastive analysis/rhetoric slant, and are in any case difficult to frame in an ELF light as the non-native informants all share the same L1.