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English as a Foreign Language: Reviewing and Editing Manuscripts

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The Editor's Perspective: Initial Review

The electronic age has provided us with increased abilities to communicate throughout the world and has made the world seem much smaller. Manuscripts are submitted electronically, the peer review process and communications are accomplished through electronic manuscript tracking systems, and most editing is done in an online format. Journals are published online as well as on paper, providing options for readers and increasing more global readership. Papers published in journals are available for purchase online, and many are now available through open access. This increased availability has also increased visibility, which has contributed to the escalation in manuscripts being submitted across countries and across languages. It has been reported that pressure to publish in English has become more intense in recent years (Cameron 2007). These authors may be fluent in speaking English but writing presents challenges. Format may be different for many of our international colleagues.

In addition to the challenges of writing in a foreign language, many of our international colleagues find our organizational structure and linear delivery unfamiliar to their writing style. Cultural issues as well as linguistics add to the challenges of writing in English for a scientific journal. While authors can find resources for grammar, words, and phrases, the real challenge is composing a sentence that delivers accurately developed messages to readers. The time spent structuring these sentences and formatting a manuscript takes considerable time in a foreign language. Some authors may have learned English only within a classroom and have not communicated with individuals whose native language is English. This adds to the complexity of their writing.

In the past 5 years, the number of international manuscripts submitted to our Journal has increased significantly to a point where approximately 35% to 40% of manuscripts are from non-English speaking countries. Most are well written with a few problems of syntax, spelling errors, and terminology. For instance in the United States, we use the term "procured" when discussing removal of an organ from a deceased donor for transplantation. Our international colleagues usually use the term "organ harvesting." About 10 years ago, at the request of and in respect to deceased donor families, this term was changed from "organ harvesting" to "organ procurement." Over the years as Editor, it has become evident that there are certain reviewers who are more willing to take the extra time that is often required for reviewing papers for which English is a foreign language. Although the paper may have passed initial scrutiny, it is often sentence structure and terminology that add to the difficulty of a review.

When a new manuscript is submitted, it is first reviewed to ensure that the topic is appropriate for the journal and the format is aligned with author guidelines. Manuscripts submitted from authors for whom English is a foreign language undergo additional scrutiny in terms of clarity of content. Poor

language quality sets the paper up for rejection and increases the burden on reviewers. If the topic is one of great interest but there are concerns about clarity, track changes are used, and the paper is sent back to the author with a request that these areas be clarified before the manuscript is sent for peer review. A note is sent to the authors stating that these clarifications will increase the likelihood of positive feedback during the peer review process. While the paper may continue to require attention to grammar and spelling, it is usually sent out to carefully selected reviewers.

The Reviewer's Perspective

When a reviewer receives a manuscript and the title indicates it is from an international colleague, a typical first reaction is often one of cautious hopefulness. Reviewers are cautious because experience has taught many reviewers that manuscripts from authors whose native language is not English often contain numerous grammatical, syntax, and spelling errors. These types of errors make the manuscript difficult to read and can also be so distracting that the quality of the work and its potential contribution to the literature is masked. However, because of a desire to learn from our international colleagues and to support their work, in addition to the usual hope that the manuscript will be relevant for the journal and of sufficient scientific merit, there is the hope that if revisions are required, the authors can accomplish them with a reasonable amount of effort.

As the review is undertaken, the reviewer is guided by the principle that the same standards and guidelines provided by the journal should apply to all manuscripts under review. The challenge of reading manuscripts from authors whose native language is not English results as the reviewer attempts to disentangle poorly structured sentences and even determine if the words being used actually express the thoughts the author wants to convey. Such a situation can make it difficult to resist the temptation of the reviewer to focus on editorial needs of the manuscript rather than providing sufficient critique of its scientific merit; obviously, both are needed to provide adequate guidance for revisions.

The relevance to the journal and interest to readers can present another issue to be considered when reviewing foreign-based articles. Although most journals have an international readership, some do not, and some are supported by organizations that are country-specific. Still, most authors are interested in the generalizability of their work, even to the international arena. Similarly, most scholarly readers do not limit their literature searches to only work generated within their country boundaries. While we have much to learn from international colleagues, some country-specific issues such as government policies may not be generalizable. Other times, the scope of the work may be so narrow and country-specific that it would not be of interest to the broader journal readership.

In the end, we all learn the same scientific process and all want to produce good science; therefore, scientific merit should bear no exception in the review process regardless of the country of origin. Likewise, the pressure to publish exists for us all and can create similar issues for reviewers regardless of the country of origin of the manuscript. A good student paper or a small narrowly-focused pilot study does not necessarily make a publishable manuscript regardless of the author's country of origin.

As we build relationships with colleagues across country boundaries, there is clearly a desire to learn from each other. It is commonplace for foreign-born students to study in the United States and for United States faculty, scientists, and scholars to spend extended time in other countries. As these

relationships develop, we can anticipate that our ability to communicate across language barriers will improve, enabling us to focus more on our mutual interests and less on language differences.

Human Subject Considerations

This can present more of a problem for some countries that do not require ethics review of research or Internal Review Board (IRB) approval. Conflict of interest (COI) standards vary from one country to another to a point where an issue may not be considered a COI in a different locale. If drug device studies are being described as opposed to observational or outcomes studies, those manuscripts must be held to the highest COI, ethics, and IRB standards. In the United States authors, editors, and publishers are held to strict standards for patient confidentiality. This means that a case report cannot divulge personal information or pictures without the person's written consent. This may not be an issue outside the United States, but as editors and publishers we must hold all submissions to that standard. There have been several instances in which colleagues from outside the United States had difficulty understanding this requirement to ensure patient confidentiality.

The world is getting smaller and lessons learned from good work regardless of where it is conducted may be applicable to many different countries. The research also may support work that has been done by others. Authors need to make these linkages evident in their manuscripts and reviewers need to look for such linkages. Taking the additional time to review the manuscripts can be worth it.

The Author's Perspective

The questions in Table 1 were asked of several authors who have recently submitted manuscripts and whose first language is not English.

Table 1. English as a Foreign Language: Questions for Authors

1. What is the biggest challenge when writing a scientific paper in English?
2. What resources have you found that are most helpful with the process?
3. What comments or suggestions are most helpful when you receive feedback from the reviewers and editor?
4. What advice do you have for authors writing manuscripts where English is a foreign language for them?

H. Khedmet, MD, Professor and Chief of the Department of Internal Medicine in Tehran, Iran, provided several interesting insights based on recent experiences with several manuscripts submitted to our journal. "The most challenge is the scientific terminologies, which should be meticulously selected. But if I am very familiar with the topic, my most important concern is to write my sentences as elaborately and fluently as possible. The best resource in my own practice is Google Scholar.

Whenever I am in doubt that I am using the correct terminology or combination of words or phrases, I search them in Google Scholar. If the phrase is found in large numbers, then I will use that phrase; however, if it is found but in limited numbers, I try to find articles from native American or English authors. I try to read their sentence fully to realize whether their statement has overall the same meaning as mine. Finally if it is not found, I change it, and search again to find one of the two abovementioned. When receiving feedback from the reviewers or editor, it is most helpful when they directly point out any incorrect English syntax rather than stating the article's English needs attention. Providing me with the exact areas that need attention is most helpful. As for advice to authors writing manuscripts where English is a foreign language, I would advise authors to rehearse, use Google Scholar, and request a review by another professional whose native language is English."

Marianna Resse, BiOId, an immunologist at the Second University of Naples, Italy, provided comments as well. Dr. Resse stated, "We find it useful to take a course in scientific English, to use a good dictionary, and to submit the paper to a native English speaker for review prior to submitting it to a journal. We welcome suggestions on how to improve our English." Dr. Resse's advice to authors writing manuscripts when English is a foreign language is to dedicate themselves in a "serious and professional way to writing manuscripts in English because with practice we learn to be successful."

Yaprak S. Ordin, RN, MSc, Lecturer at Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey, described difficulties writing in English and found the discussion sections most challenging. She stated that with her qualitative research, her greatest fear is losing the meaning of translated statements from her study participants. Her most surprising comment concerned the cost of having her paper edited by an English interpreter. In her area she would pay one fourth of her annual salary to have her work edited for English grammar.

The Editor's Perspective: Communicating Revision Requests

If the reviewers have determined that the paper has merit and will be of interest to readers, but needs editing for sentence structure and terminology, the work of clarification begins with a carefully written communication to the authors. It is important to request clarifications in a respectful manner. Working with the authors to clarify terminology and revise sentence structure may take patience and time, but if the paper has merit, it is well worth the time

When transmitting the paper to the publisher, I let them know that English is a foreign language. I also try to edit these papers first and send them to the publisher early to allow the extra time that may be needed.

The Copy Editor's Perspective: Ensuring Copyediting does Not Alter Intended Meaning

Copyediting challenges differ among non-English languages. Romance language-speaking authors' English may be easier to copyedit to correct English grammar because Romance languages are similar to English in structure, sharing the same Indo-European language background. However, because of the differences in basic grammatical structure between Germanic and Romance languages and, for example, Turkic languages and Chinese, manuscripts written by authors whose native language is Chinese or Turkish are much harder to copyedit than those written by native French- or Spanish-speaking authors. Working with Turkish or Chinese authors' manuscripts involves more time

trying to discern the meaning of certain sentences, and usually the manuscript will be sent back to the corresponding author with several queries regarding clarification of meaning.

Copyediting a foreign author's manuscript can be time-consuming. One strategy is to read the whole manuscript before starting to edit, so that you can get some understanding of what the intended message is. Authors may say something more clearly later in the paper than the first time you encounter it. You also can get a sense of the individual author's writing style by reviewing the whole manuscript first. Then you get to know their patterns or style of writing on parts where you understand what they are saying and that helps you decipher some more difficult sentences.

Another strategy is to look for cited references for unclear statements and access PubMed to try to figure out what the author meant by using the abstract for the cited reference. A tip is to look at abstracts of papers on the reference list that have English-speaking authors to become familiar with the terminology for the topic of the foreign-authored paper.

An established copyediting practice is to ask authors to clarify what they meant when a sentence does not seem to make sense. However, when working with non-English-speaking authors, it is more practical and conducive to a quicker turnaround to suggest different options of what the authors wrote. Then the authors can select the correct option rather than trying to clarify something that already seemed clear to them.

It is important to pay extra attention to medical terminology in non-English-speaking authors' manuscripts. For example, hospital terminology may differ because different units may have similar names as units in the United State, but not mean the same thing. This difference in terminology applies even to British, Canadian, and Australian authors (i.e., English speakers). An example is the use of the term "ward," a perfectly good English word but not used in the United States and thus potentially confusing readers from the United States.

Misuse of prepositions is common among foreign authors, perhaps a result of not knowing idioms. For example, "different from" (correct) versus "different than" (incorrect), and "died of" (correct) versus "died from" (incorrect). Another common problem to watch for is use of the wrong tense throughout manuscripts.

Conclusions

With the increased pressure to publish in English journals and the increased visibility and availability of journals in an online format, there is a rise in submissions from authors for whom English is a foreign language. Authors report significant time in structuring and formatting manuscripts for submission to English journals. Finding reviewers who are willing to partner with our international colleagues to provide comprehensive feedback offers authors the best opportunity to be published. There is much information to be shared about scientific and health care advances in the international communities. Providing authors with resources such as those listed in Table 2 will demonstrate a willingness to partner with our international colleagues in sharing their knowledge across cultures, countries, and languages.

Table 2. Resources for Authors: English as a Foreign Language

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Pronouns	http://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/36/
Paraphrasing	http://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/3/8/
Combining sentences	http://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/3/4/
English grammar and usage	https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/resourcesforwriters/grammarandusage
Academic scientific writing	https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/resourcesforwriters/science-writing
Scientific English as a Foreign Language	http://users.wpi.edu/~nab/sci_eng/

Reference

Cameron C (2007) Bridging the gap: working productively with ESL authors. *Science Editor* 30(2), 43-44.

Authors

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