

## Non-English writers: pitfalls and ways out

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For those whose first language is not English, problems often arise in communication. This is also a major issue for academics in non-English speaking countries, who contribute in terms of research and papers and prefer to get their work published in reputable international journals as this somehow carries a significant weight in academic appointments and progress in career.

But many manuscripts originating from non-English speaking countries meet immediate rejection because of poor language and writing style, and syntax and grammar problems. A number of developing countries have their own prestigious journals that are indexed, but the language problem is still apparent in locally published articles where write-ups lack coherence and flow.

In personal communication with Western reviewers, it has come to light that academics whose first language is not English have a style of thought and expression based on their original first language and this reflects in their writings. They are often unable to convey the true message and the aims of their academic write-ups. In the local scenario, feedback received from international reviewers on manuscripts have revealed problems in a number of areas: non-conformity with language style, inconsistency in narration, inappropriate choice of words, use of superfluous language, adoption of dramatic style, switching of tenses, subject/verb disagreements, grammatical and syntax errors/omissions.<sup>1</sup>

There is a lot of research from various non-English speaking countries that verify the above statements and the restrictions because of language issues: a study from Saudi Arabia identified the difficulties faced by postgraduate Arabic students and suggested that academic English writing can be facilitated by computer-assisted writing instructions as well as help from native speakers.<sup>2</sup>

A study in Turkey<sup>3</sup> found that during doctoral thesis

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preparation, apprenticeship does not prepare the students for research publication and it is viewed as acquiring competency in writing separately after the thesis is done. Chinese language poses particular difficulty when translating into English as it sometimes hides the intended meaning.<sup>4</sup> A study in Brazil<sup>5</sup> reported that publication rates were higher for those authors with a good command on English, particularly written English.

A huge amount of work is being done in non-English speaking countries and it is important that the world knows about these contributions rather than getting them under the blanket.

A number of solutions have been presented to this problem. Language polishing has been suggested whereby companies who hire experts can look at manuscripts before submission for publication. Editors can refer authors to outside language editing companies or outsource the editing themselves.<sup>6</sup> A paper from Finland had suggested training language teachers to teach writing courses in academic English in such contexts. Suggestions have also been made to include linguistic research into cultural writing practices.<sup>7</sup>

An informative web resource recommends that non-English writers should try to write very simply without the use of jargon, avoid long sentences and use correct grammar. It is important that authors avoid repetition, are careful about tenses, develop their own writing style rather than imitate, proof read, edit and maintain openness.<sup>8</sup>

Another similar resource recommends seven steps: repeatedly reading (including extensive reading from other books, magazines and articles); building a personalized dictionary from own reading; engaging in forums and conversations; starting a personal blog; editing and rewriting; asking a native English speaker to review work; and accepting constructive criticism.<sup>9</sup>

The European Association of Science Editors (EASE)<sup>10</sup> has also suggested a huge resource for material to refer for non-English writers from a number of countries. This forms a valuable guide to a number of authors aspiring to

contribute towards scientific literature.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) has developed a guideline under the caption "MLA style" for formatting manuscripts and using English language in writing.<sup>11</sup> A paper further recommends introduction of a journal section that might be headed 'Copy Editor's Corner' that can become a source of great help to the writers rather than using a guide book.<sup>12</sup>

It is quite obvious that there is a huge problem for non-English writers but solutions are available as well. Improving English writing can go a long way in making authors visible in prestigious academic journals of the world. The research ground in Pakistan is quite fertile and overcoming this language hurdle will open a big gate allowing efflux of valuable scientific information with a wider dissemination.

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