

Success in Getting Articles Published by Iranian Medical Researchers: The Role of English Language

Nematullah Shomoossi and Mohsen Kooshan

Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences, Iran

Abstract: The role of English as a medium of scholarly communication can be highlighted as a major barrier against publishing articles in international journals. This becomes more serious in EFL contexts like Iran whereas the use of English is remarkably limited. On the other hand, pressure from the higher education authorities has turned publishing articles to an inevitable duty of the faculty. This qualitative study was conducted in a major medical university in Iran, whereas four low-published and four rather high-published authors were interviewed for their story from doing research to getting published. Their strategies (either low or high published researchers) in getting their articles published in relation with the role of English writing are reported in three stages: pre-preparation, preparation and post-preparation stages. Finally, the results are summarized and suggestions are made.

Key words: Strategies • Publishing • Qualitative • Research • Submission • Journals

INTRODUCTION

Publishing articles in international articles is directly related with the contribution of higher education into science production. Currently over 150 scholarly journals are published in medical fields, which are mostly indexed in credible databases, but Iranian scholars still seek to publish in international journals too. This is partly inspired by evaluations of science production which bring Iranian scholars a relatively lower rank in the international competition. For instance, while there were six universities from two Middle East countries (Turkey and Israel) among the first 500 top universities of the world in a two-year evaluation by the University of Shanghai, no universities from Iran were included [1]. The criteria for evaluation included Nobel Prize winners, highly cited researchers, articles published in indexed and ISI journals and the performance of each researcher.

University selection is normally calculated on the basis of publishing articles per faculty member in international journals in a one-year interval. Iran hosts 30,000 faculty members and will achieve a satisfactory ranking if 30,000 articles with Iranian affiliations are indexed in ISI in a one-year time span. However, in the best year (i.e. 2003), Iranian scholars had published only 3000 articles (i.e. only around 10% of the faculty). Even Sharif University, which is one of the most pioneering

technical universities, has only 200 articles published with its affiliation [1]. But it cannot be denied that the rate of publishing articles has doubled in 2003 in comparison with 2001 (with only 1440 articles) [2]. In 2006, the rate increased into 7584 articles; and in 2007, Iran achieved the 30th ranking of the world with 9065 articles [3].

With such a motivation on the one hand and the pressure from the authorities in higher education on the other, publishing articles in international journals has turned to an inevitable duty of the faculty. A major barrier in this regard has been the role of English as a medium of scholarly communication. Therefore, focusing on the urge to publish in international journals, this article will report the strategies of low and high published medical researchers in getting their articles published as far as the English writing is concerned.

Review of Literature: English is a foreign language in Iran and is rarely spoken and used in scientific circles unless the gathering is international. Accordingly, learning how to use English is mainly a personal enterprise and academic programs fulfill a partial requirement of the real needs. Scholars are expected to write in English if they are educated in the UK, US or other English-speaking countries, or if they have learned it by self-reading. However, often their written product is put into strict scrutiny in international journals and returned with

corrections, revisions and frustration. They suffer writing the article and get frustrated when the product is rejected despite its creative content. Therefore, this aspect can be considered as a major debilitating factor for Iranian scholars in getting their articles published and contributing to science production as well as to the ranking of their country.

The ability to write in English affects the successful submission and publication of research reports [4-7]. However, some believe that researchers do not have the time to master in English writing [8-11] and hence need a *translator assistant*. Despite some tolerance of non-native English writing with some journals [12], most international journals are sensitive and insist on accurate and Standard English writing. In certain cases, authors claim that most rejections are the result of poor English writing rather than poor content [6]. Flowerdew and Li [13] investigated the Chinese scientists' success in publishing their articles and emphasized the cooperation of a team of translators and editors in getting articles published. In a country like Iran, whereas English is a foreign language and less prevalent in academic settings, attention to article preparation can be more than a blessing for medical scholars in particular as the research budget in these fields is more voluminous than other fields such as engineering and humanities.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This qualitative study was conducted in a major medical university in Iran, whereas four low-published and four rather high-published authors were interviewed for their story from doing research to getting published. All in their native language (i.e. Persian), the interviews were conducted up to the saturation point of the data. They were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim on paper and were analyzed by protocol analysis. The open-ended questions of the interviews were shaped on the basis of literature review and the experiences of the authors. They were checked and re-checked by authors and some colleagues for redundancy and phrasing. For consistency purposes, interviews were all conducted by the first author in the office of the interviewer under similar conditions of light, noise, time of the day, etc.

The written protocols were qualitatively reviewed to extract themes and concepts. In other words, the obtained protocols were coded in three levels of open, axial and selective coding. In open coding, the protocols were read

line-by-line (looking for words and sentences in the text bearing some meaning), where provisional explanatory concepts and categories emerged. These concepts and categories were then enriched, modified and verified in the transcribed protocols of other participants. The primary goals of open coding are to conceptualize and categorize data, achieved through two basic analytic procedures: making comparisons and asking questions. This type of coding begins the process of labeling many individual phenomena. In time, a number of individually labeled concepts are clustered around a related theme. The individual concepts are gathered together to form more powerful and abstract categories. Once categories are formed in open coding, they are fleshed out in terms of their given properties and dimensions. The properties are characteristics of a category, the delineation of which defines and gives it meaning [14]. Dimensions illustrate how each property can vary along a continuum. Open coding can be achieved by examining the transcripts by line, by sentence, or by paragraph and sometimes by eyeballing the entire document.

Axial coding, the second stage, is the process of relating categories to their subcategories linking a category at the level of properties and dimensions [14]. A coding paradigm involving conditions, actions and interactions and consequences actualizes this process. The focus of axial coding is to create a model that details the specific conditions that give rise to a phenomenon's occurrence.

The final stage of data analysis was selective coding, which builds upon the foundation of the previous coding efforts. Selective coding is "the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" [14]. Strauss and Corbin [14] stated that this central or core category should have the analytic power to "pull the other categories together to form an explanatory whole".

Ethically, the interviewees were convinced to participate in the interviews and they did so willingly. The written protocols were kept confidential and were used once only for the present article. No other uses were made of the protocols.

RESULTS

There were eight participants (four low-published and four high-published authors) (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1: Participants in the study

Publication	Pseudo-Names	Age	Published articles		Employed for.....years	Academic Status
			Persian	English		
Highly published	Alavi	50	20	16	12	Associate professor
	Mohammadi	48	28	14	14	Assistant professor
	Rezayi	35	17	18	7	Assistant professor
	Bahrami	42	14	14	4	Assistant professor
Low Published	Ahmadi	46	10	-	14	Assistant professor
	Majidi	33	1	-	8	Instructor
	Taghavi	34	1	-	8	Assistant professor
	Mousavi	44	3	-	10	Instructor

As article preparation can be considered as a task in Ellis' (2003) terms [15], the interviewees also highlighted their role in accomplishing different steps of the task. Due to real exposure to the preparation steps, the high-published authors were able to explain various aspects and details of the task more clearly than the low-published interviewees, who were really unable to clearly express the details in an organized way due to little or no exposure to the situation. Therefore, "clear expression" was considered as the major theme of the "task accomplishment", which will be presented below in terms of task steps to article preparation in three stages: pre-preparation, preparation and post-preparation.

The Pre-preparation Stage: This stage involves the time when relevant data are not yet gathered for writing an article. This stage can be called the stage of learning strategies. A research is conducted at this stage and researchers prepare an article out of that (the second stage) and submit it for publication (the third stage).

The Preparation Stage: the main concern of the researcher in this stage is to shape out the written stuff into an acceptable format (e.g. Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion). Writing up the whole piece occurs at this stage and the relevant strategies can be called the writing strategies.

Post-preparation Stage: At this stage, the article is already written up and the corresponding author is ready to submit the article to the target journal, which demands its own concerns. The relevant strategies may be called the submission strategies.

Strategies Used in the Learning Stage: Bahrami believed that research is mainly shaped at the stage of designing the study and writing up the proposal, which he considers

a very sensitive stage; but it is normal if the research committee demands revisions to the proposal since they make the research stronger and enhance the likelihood of its being published. Also, he believed that conducting solid studies in the field of (say, environmental) health requires considerable funds, which is barely provided by the Iranian universities; consequently, publication is indirectly affected. Focusing on the same problem, Rezayi referred to the financial problems of the areas such as anatomy, whereas fundamental studies are rarely supported in most universities.

Bahrami, a high published researcher, believed that research is a normally team work conducted by a number of experts guided by a major specialist in the field. Rezayi also highlights the role of leadership at this stage. For example, he cites some articles he has published with the supervisor of his PhD research; he explained how the publication was controlled by the leader and how he conducted the laboratory tests. Mohammadi, too, believes that the influence of the team leader can often take articles toward an easier publication process. Quite differently, Alavi referred to the intrinsic motivation of the researcher, which can be complemented by the extrinsic incentives offered by the universities. Of course, Alavi considered some extrinsic incentives (such as promotions) as a drawback since at times such forces may urge researchers to do less solid studies, the publication of which might be not so successful.

It was evident that less successful publishers, like Ahmadi, did not give an account of the first phase of a successful research and reply to the questions only with a vague reference to the difficulty of writing in English which makes them disappointed. Majidi, another low-published author, hopes to find a way to get two current articles published in international journals by finding a reliable translator or taking intensive courses in English writing within the next few months. He further suggested

attending workshops on (Persian or English) article preparation; however, he attributed part of the duty to the university commitments in training good writers, developing writing centers, editorial services, reducing the instructional duties of the faculty to focus more on the research potentialities. As an expert in statistics, Taghavi believed that attention to the design and statistical issues in planning a research are the priorities for successful publication. But, he admits that weak English knowledge is the barrier. Mousavi has never submitted an article to an international journal and believed that the lack of personal motivation, no external pressure, lack of communication and less motivation from the academic environment are factors minimizing their contribution into international journals. Admitting his own weakness in English, Mousavi suggested that articles can be published with the help of writing centers even in other languages such as German and French.

Strategies of the Writing Stage: It is at this stage that language proficiency issues are raised; for instance, Rezayi who is a highly published author described his procedures of developing a report into an article in different stages, which is far from being a recommended route. First, he wrote up the article in Persian; then he translates the text sentence by sentences into English; finally, the translated product is sent to a number of colleagues whose English knowledge is better than his; he asked translators for some help from time to time. Rezayi was concerned mainly about the accuracy of his expression; therefore, he found a similar article in the field and reads it over; then he models his own writing by some phrases, expressions and idioms. He thought such strategies can enhance the chance of the article being published. Similarly, Bahrami's experiences are changing now because his first article was translated by a reliable translator and surprisingly, it was rejected by the target journal. Now he took a similar position in modeling similar articles; for structure and composition, he referred to at least 20-30 articles which serve the references of his article at the same time. This might create problems of plagiarism; therefore, he admitted that the strengths of the reference articles serve as the model of his writing but he avoids copying and pasting their text because journals first check the articles with software for probable plagiarism. He also referred to specialized software for data analysis, drawing figures and tables.

Contrary to the views of Bahrami, Alavi believed that the original article needs to be written in English and translation is an extra burden on the author with no

success in getting published. He added that joining a translator can be considered if the translator has a solid basis of knowledge in medical sciences. Reference to similar articles is what he admitted too.

Among the four high published authors, it is Rezayi who highlights the accuracy of references and considers this section of the article as a very crucial part. He added that the Persian references must be translated into English so that reviewers in the international journals can easily trace the non-English references of the article. Of course, all high published authors agree that Endnote and Reference Manager are essential for the successful acceptance of an article in international journals. However, this software was not familiar for the low published authors and none of them had practically used it.

While Alavi believed in double editing of the articles (by both specialists and language editors), Rezayi did not believe in the latter at all. Instead, he considered the submission guidelines of the target journal as a more important factor; otherwise, the efforts will bear no fruit. For him, the knowledge of English plays a very important role and speeds up the article preparation process. For Rezayi, articles written well in good English are likely to get more citations. Therefore, he is planning to improve his own English so that no translator is required for publishing his articles. The role of English knowledge was also highlighted by low published authors despite the fact that none of them had reached the second stage of English article preparation and all believed that poor English knowledge was a major barrier for them. Majidi and Taghavi both expressed their plan to improve their English in near future at least for writing English articles.

Strategies of the Post-writing Stage: Based on the experiences of the high published authors in submitting articles to international journals and lack of such experiences in low published authors, it is expected of the latter to be unaware of this stage. However, informed by personal curiosity and environmental information, Ahmadi knew that some ISI journals demand a publication fee and considers this as a major barrier. Taghavi has the same opinion on financial issues as bank transactions are done indirectly with a further burden on the author; credit cards are not used in Iran and political influences add to the problem. Bahrami, a high published author also admits this as a major barrier since he has lost a publication opportunity only because of problems in transferring the publication fee.

Bahrami further suggested establishing a writing center to get advice on locating journals, as well as information on their status, credibility and interaction with them. For Rezayi, selecting the right journal matching with the article topic, containing similar articles and easy-to-use submission guidelines are the submission priorities. He also considers publication as an international competition although it is hard, expensive and time-consuming.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to report the strategies of low and high published medical researchers in getting their articles published as far as the English writing is concerned. Unsurprisingly, it was expected of highly-published authors to provide the researchers with considerable information on their strategies from the very stage of writing to the stage of publishing [16]; however, this information came out to be meager too. The article production in fact was conceived to be a real-life task for the participants, as extracted from the verbal protocol of the interviewees. They referred to its many interrelated facets, in direct relation with strategies. The task can be conceived of a combination of skills and strategies with a guaranteed consequential validity and confirmed authenticity within the task framework. It is suggested that this type of task be used as a teaching and testing measure in the sense that training would-be authors on these strategies is of a teaching priority; also, their being tested by a real task such as preparing a genuine article and submitting it for publication in real journals can be a real test of abilities especially for postgraduate students. It is, therefore, of a potential use for assessing the academic capability of applicants for postgraduate vacancies.

As far as the strategies in the Learning Stage are concerned [16], the common idea was that research is mainly shaped at the stage of designing the study and writing up the proposal, some issues were highlighted by the researchers including financial problems, team work, leadership, intrinsic motivation and the weak English knowledge of the researchers, extrinsic incentives, difficulty of writing in English, the assistance of writing centers, editorial services and statistical issues.

Language proficiency issues are raised at the second stage; some may start with writing up the article in Persian; then comes the translating the text sentence by sentences into English; finally, the translated product is sent to language editors. Among the concerns of the

authors at the stage of writing the article, there were issues such as the accuracy of his expression and modeling similar articles for structure and composition, problems of plagiarism, copying and pasting threat for probable plagiarism, using Endnote and Reference Manager and considering the submission guidelines of the target journal. It must be stated however that such problems are not restricted to Iranian researchers since Ammon [17], as a German editor of a book published in English, reported on criticisms of his work on the grounds of its near unintelligibility [because] the grammatical mistakes are so severe [17]. The same problem is reported about Chinese scientists facing a language problem in their attempts at international publication [18].

At the post-writing or the submission stage [16], the final concerns of the authors include submitting articles to international journals and lack of such experiences in low published authors, the high demand of ISI journals for a publication fee, problems with bank transactions, lack of credit cards in Iran and the role of publication as a hard, expensive and time-consuming international competition.

In general, the clear expression of details of article production by highly-published authors and lack of such knowledge in low-published ones, presents us with an intensified pedagogical focus on the following strategies:

- Transferring the experiences of highly-published authors to low-published ones,
- Cooperating translators and editors in preparing the publishable manuscripts,
- Accuracy in citing reliable references.

As a suggestion, other team members can help authors including authors' colleagues or supervisors, colleagues' Native English speaking (NES) spouses, correctors who may work professionally as editors of manuscripts but are not usually specialists in the field, journal reviewers, journal editors and copy editors [19]. Also, editorial assistance can be offered by journals so that would-be authors can benefit from these services.

Appendix 1-Open-ended interview questions

Have you ever submitted an article to an international journal?

Which journals?

What should be done for publishing in an international journal?

What is your personal method? Why have you been successful in publishing?

Why do we need to publish in an international journal?

Is it necessary to encourage Iranian scholars to publish in an international journal? How?

What facilities do they need?

What incentives do you suggest?

What are the barriers?

Where do you seek help for publishing in an international journal?

Do you write the articles by yourself? Do others help you to write them?

Do you write in Persian first? Or you just write in English from the beginning?

Do you get your Persian articles translated by professional translators?

Do you hand in the Persian manuscript to the translator? Who translates your articles?

Is it a team work? Or you do it personally?

Do international journals accept your articles easily? Or you receive a lot of revisions?

What are the main revisions you get from reviewers?

Which one do you think is important: format or content?

Do you feel English is necessary? Or you can become a highly cited author without English too?

Which ways do you suggest for learning English?

Do you feel all Iranian scholars need to know English?

What is the role of English in understanding lectures in international conferences?

REFERENCES

1. Fazeli, N., 2007. Challenges of the humanities in Iran. Quarterly of Social Sciences of the University of Allameh Tabatabayi, Volume 31. Available online at <http://www.farhangshenasi.com/persian/node/184?page=0%2C6> [Persian]
2. Etemadi, A., 2008. Interview with Dr. Arash Etemadi. Available online at <http://publicrelations.tums.ac.ir/news/detail.asp?newsID=7859> [Persian]
3. Fathollahi, Y., 2007. Interview with Dr. Yaghoub Fathollahi. Available online at <http://alef.ir/content/view/39693/> [Persian].
4. Benfield, J.R. and C.B. Feak, 2006. How authors can cope with the burden of English as an international language. *Chest*, 129: 1728-1730.
5. Benfield, J.R. and K.M. Howard, 2000. The language of science. *European Journal of Cardio-thoracic Surgery*, 18: 642-648.
6. Coates, R., B. Sturgeon, J. Bohannon and E. Pasini, 2002. Language and publication in cardiovascular research articles (Editorial). *Cardiovascular Res.*, 53: 279-285.
7. Kirkman, J., 1996. Confine yourself to forms of English that are easily understood. *British Med. J.*, 313: 1321-1322.
8. Curry, M.J. and T. Lillis, 2004. Multilingual scholars and the imperative to publish in English: Negotiating interests, demands and rewards. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38: 663-688.
9. Flowerdew, J., 1999a. Writing for scholarly publication in English: The case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8: 123-145.
10. Flowerdew, J., 1999b. Problems in writing for scholarly publication in English: The case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8: 243-264.
11. Lillis, T. and M.J. Curry, 2006. Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars: Interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English-medium texts. *Written Communication*, 23: 3-35.
12. Flowerdew, J., 2001. Attitudes of journal editors to nonnative speaker contributions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35: 121-150.
13. Flowerdew, J. and Y. Li, 2007. Language re-use among Chinese apprentice scientists writing for publication. *Applied Linguistics*, 28: 440-465.
14. Strauss, A. and J. Corbin, 1998. Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory, procedures and techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
15. Ellis, R., 2003. Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
16. Okamura, A., 2006. Two types of strategies used by Japanese scientists, when writing research articles in English. *System*, 34: 68-79.
17. Ammon, U., 2000. Towards more fairness in international English: Linguistic rights of non-native speakers? In R. Phillipson (Ed.), *Rights to language: Equity, power and education* (pp: 111-116). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
18. Li, Y. and J. Flowerdew, 2007. Shaping Chinese novice scientists' manuscripts for publication. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16: 100-117.
19. Burrough-Boenisch, J., 2003. Shapers of published NNS research articles. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12: 223-243.