“Good” and “acceptable” English in L2 research writing: Ideals and realities in history and computer science

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Abstract

In light of the recent developments on the international publishing scene, increasingly dominated by L2 writers of English, the question of what is considered to be “good” and “acceptable” English calls for further research. This paper examines in what ways researchers describe the English used for research writing in their field. Interview data were collected from historians and computer scientists working in Finland and Sweden. Our analysis points towards some differences in the way researchers perceive “good” writing in English in their field, and what they themselves report to practice as (co-)authors, readers/reviewers, and proofreaders. The discrepancy between the ideals and realities of research writing in English was clear in the case of the historians. Our findings suggest that in research writing for publication, there is a pull towards some form of standard norm. This standard can be jointly negotiated during the writing, reviewing, and proofreading process. It may also develop in different directions in different disciplines, but it is likely to be based on the principles of understandability and clarity.

1. Introduction

Research into writing for publication has become an established part of English for Academic Purposes and is sometimes referred to as ERPP (English for Research Publication Purposes). Two special issues of JEAP have been dedicated to this topic: the 2007 SI included a range of papers focusing primarily on the problems experienced by researchers writing in English as an additional language; the 2014 SI approached the topic from a somewhat different perspective which viewed English as one among several languages available to international researchers in multilingual settings (e.g. Gentil & Séror, 2014; Gnutzmann & Rabe, 2014; McGrath, 2014). Several studies have discussed the issues of perceived difficulties experienced by researchers who use English as their additional language (e.g. Flowerdew, 1999, 2007; Langum & Sullivan, 2017; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Olsson & Sheridan, 2012; Pérez-Llantada, Plo, & Ferguson, 2011). This line of research has often underscored the centre versus periphery dichotomy which marginalises non-Anglophone researchers (Canagarajah, 2002, 2013). In a recent article, Hyland (2016) debunks what he calls the myth of linguistic injustice. Drawing on the statistics concerning recent journal submissions and his own editorial experience, he shows that other factors such as academic expertise and access to international research networks play an important role in being accepted for publication. Writing for international publication presents challenges for both Anglophone and non-Anglophone researchers, and the majority of journal submissions today...
originate from non-Anglophone countries. Submissions originating from non-English-speaking countries have dominated English as L2 versus academic writing in L1. Much previous research (e.g. McGrath, 2014; Perez-Llantada et al., 2011) has considered the choice question has concluded that L2-English researchers increasingly write in English, but these studies tend not to consider what kind of quality of English is required from them. The question of language quality is important since the increase in the number of L2-English writers also means that an increasing number of L2-English researchers act as reviewers and editors in gatekeeping positions, as reviewers in particular are often appointed based on the literature cited in the submitted manuscript. Regardless of being L1 or L2 users of English, reviewers and editors act as gatekeepers of scientific quality above all. As mentioned above, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of published and cited articles by L2-English researchers across different disciplines, which inevitably leads to changes in who is involved in the reviewing and editing process (e.g. Hyland, 2016, p. 65). In this context, Standard English norms may indeed prevail but not as a result of English-L1 users’ intervention but rather as a result of the practices adopted by the scientific communities, which include increasing numbers of L2 users of English who are influential in their respective fields. Thus, L2-English researchers’ perceptions of what counts as “good” English are increasingly relevant for other researchers writing for publication.

Importantly, previous research has suggested that we cannot take it for granted that the norms for “good” English would stay the same; for instance, Gnutzmann and Rabe’s (2014) findings imply that the mere increase of L2-English researchers in a field may influence what is accepted as “good” English. Jenkins’ (2014) proposal of a new ELFA paradigm in EAP writing instruction calls for moving away from “native academic English” towards a more inclusive approach which takes into account the diversity of students who use English as a lingua franca. Jenkins’ proposal has provoked a strong reaction from Tribble (2017), who argues that the native versus non-native distinction is not applicable to academic writing, which is subject to disciplinary differences and has to be mastered by both L1 and L2 users of English who are novice to the field. This argument is not new, as EAP researchers and practitioners have often underscored the irrelevance of the native versus non-native dichotomy in relation to academic writing (e.g. see Hyland, 2016 for an overview).

Our purpose in this paper, then, is to shed light on researcher perceptions about the “quality” of English in research writing, and what this implies about the kind of English accepted in research writing in particular fields. We do this by conducting a comparative analysis of researchers working in two different fields and countries. What is perceived as “good” writing in academia is often embedded in discourses that emphasise the importance of the mother tongue or a universally recognisable standard (Mauranen, 2016), such as Standard written English which does not belong to any given community (e.g. Elbow, 2002). In addition, academic publishing of traditional genres such as research articles is a highly regulated form of writing with its own conventions and guidelines, as well as established peer review processes. On the one hand, this degree of regulation may imply that any changes in what kind of language is accepted as “good” or “good enough” often depends on vague native-speaker intuition and needs to be accepted by most if not all actors involved in the publication process (e.g. Hartse & Kubota, 2014). On the other hand, Tribble (2017) reports the occurrence of “non-canonical” forms (Rozycki & Johnson, 2013) in some papers published in the high impact journal Acta Tropicana, identifying approximately one deviation for every 60 words in his corpus of selected papers (p. 37). Tribble concludes that L2 users of English may have their papers accepted for publication in leading journals despite non-standard language uses at clause level, as long as the rhetorical structure of the research article genre is followed. Flowerdew and Wang (2016) have shown that there is a threshold for how many language errors in a submitted manuscript can be considered to hinder understanding. They examined 15 manuscripts by Chinese researchers which were eventually published in SCI-indexed journals and found that over 100 corrections were made to each manuscript, including a substantial amount of revisions that affect the meaning of the text and involve negotiation between the author and the editor (e.g. substitution, addition, deletion, and rearrangement at the lexico-grammatical level). This finding underscores the fact that language norms in academic writing are being renegotiated in the process of writing and reviewing the manuscripts for publication.

It has also been shown that reviewers’ comments on “language” are often unclear and may refer to rhetorical aspects of the text or register features (e.g. Hyland, 2016, p. 66). For example, Englander (2006) suggests that L2 writers in her study did not
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