How to overcome common obstacles to publishing in English

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Section 5:
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For this issue on research in developing countries, we decided to take a closer look at the challenges researchers from developing and/or non-English speaking countries face when trying to get their work published, and determine what they can do to overcome them.

To answer this question, a literature review was carried out in Scopus using a number of keywords, including: scholarly communication, Africa, language issue, publication language, multilingual scholars, third world, developing country/countries, and scholarly publication. After de-duplication of the output of multiple searches this resulted in a list of 139 articles and reviews. The abstracts of all articles in this list were then carefully reviewed, and those that were not deemed relevant for this piece were removed. The final list included 73 articles and reviews, published between 1996 and 2013.

Figure 1 shows a Wordle (1) word map generated based on the titles and abstracts of all the articles and reviews in the list. The larger the font size of the word, the more frequently it occurs in the articles included in this literature review. Words that stand out include: research, English, publication, journal(s), publishing and language. In other words, it's clear, and not surprising, that publishing is a strong theme in these articles. But what are the actual obstacles that researchers from developing countries and/ or non-English speaking countries face when trying to get their work published?

Obstacles to overcome

A review of multilingual scholars' participation in global academic communities revealed a number of problems that researchers face when trying to publish their work in international, English language journals (2). The most obvious obstacles are related to language issues. For example, writing in English is cognitively more demanding for non-native speakers than for native speakers, which can make the process of writing far more time consuming. Second, the presence of linguistic errors in a manuscript, or the use of a rhetorical or regional style that does not match the style of the English language research community, can negatively influence the outcome of the peer review process (3), particularly if the research being described is of mediocre rather than outstanding quality. Furthermore, non-native speakers can have difficulties paraphrasing the work of others, which means they run the risk of unintentionally plagiarizing the work of others (4). Finally, non-native speakers are sometimes less familiar with rhetorical styles favored by the English language research community.

Other potential obstacles include a lack of connections to key members of the disciplinary community, potential bias towards manuscript submission by non-English speaking authors (see also 5), scarcity of funding to conduct research, and a general focus on 'local' research and collaboration with neighboring countries rather than on wider international collaboration (2).

Another study focusing specifically on challenges related to scholarly publishing in sub-Saharan Africa revealed that: "Scholarly publishing in sub-Saharan Africa faces numerous challenges, including technological, socio-political, and economic challenges as well as an environment that does not favor scholarly publishing" (6). Specific obstacles raised in this study include the lack of participation in scholarly conferences, brain drain and technological challenges. For example, lack of Internet access makes it very difficult for scholars in the region to submit their work electronically, to access electronic journal content online, or to act as reviewers using electronic submission systems. As a result of these, and other potential obstacles: "Very few articles published by scholars from sub-Saharan Africa may become citation classics or even find a place in the list of key papers on the emerging research fronts" (6).

Possible solutions

There are clearly many potential obstacles that researchers from developing countries and/or non-English speaking countries face when trying to get their work published. But what can they do to try to overcome them?

Recommendations for researchers to increase their chances for publication success include:

- **Be patient and persistent:** do not give up too quickly. If your paper is rejected, use the Editors' and reviewers' comments and feedback to further improve the quality of your paper. If at first you don't succeed, try again (2).

- **Collaborate with other researchers:** make contact with other, more experienced, researchers whenever possible, and look for potential areas of collaboration (7).

- **Imitate the style of others:** read papers in your field of research by prominent researchers and try to mirror their rhetorical styles (2, 7). However beware of committing

Figure 1: A Word map based on the titles and abstracts of 73 selected articles and reviews. Source: Wordle

plagiarism. For information on publishing ethics, see the Ethics Toolkit.

• **Adhere to journal guidelines:** make sure you read the journal's guidelines carefully and comply with them before submitting your paper (7, 8).

• **Linguistic editing:** "The importance of good English language usage cannot be over-emphasized. {…} Should one do a full language check before sending in an article? Although it is expensive and time consuming, the answer is YES" (9). So when in doubt, ask someone to review your manuscript before submitting it. But opinions differ on whether this should be a professional corrector, a local editor, a language service provider, a convenience editor (e.g. English speaking colleague), or a literacy broker (10, 11).

• **Find the right outlet for your work:** Some journals are more open to publishing work by non-native English researchers than others. Investing some time in finding the right journal, by checking journal websites, and reviewing work they've already published can also help increase your chance of publication success.

• **Increase the visibility of your work:** help increase the visibility of your research findings by maintaining a website for your research team, blogging about your results, using social media, and consider submitting your paper to a more visible (Open Access) journal.

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