

# A Language Apart:

The Experience of  
Non-native English-  
speaking Scholars in  
Academic Publishing



Academic  
Language  
Experts

Translation & Editing for Academia

# INTRODUCTION

## ENGLISH IS THE UNDISPUTED INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE OF SCHOLARSHIP

Scholars the world over write in English to communicate new knowledge, to advance their academic careers, and gain recognition for their discoveries by publishing in international journals.<sup>2</sup> However, for native speakers of languages other than English, this situation presents a number of challenges. Many non-native English speakers feel they are at a considerable disadvantage when compared with native-English-speaking scholars. For them, writing an academic paper in a foreign language adds an extra layer of complexity to an already high-stakes and high-pressure endeavor. This is true even for those who have a strong command of colloquial English, but do not necessarily have sufficient proficiency in academic rhetoric, terminology, and style to pass the bar of acceptance for publication.

This report seeks both to better define this problem and to present solutions that will enable non-native English-speaking scholars to feel confident that, despite their more limited English abilities, their research stands an equal chance of success in a competitive academic world. Based on a survey conducted in 2019, we found that these researchers need more assistance from publishers, journal editors, and their universities in order to reduce the obstacles preventing them from sharing their scholarship.



# A GLOBAL SURVEY

## of Non-native English-speaking Scholars

Academic Language Experts is an academic translation and editing company working in multiple languages and academic disciplines. The majority of our clients are non-native English-speaking scholars, and we see the challenges they face in publishing their research on a daily basis. As part of our efforts to better support our authors, we created a questionnaire, on which this report is based, in order to understand how they perceive the publishing process; the pressures they are under to write and publish in English; and the obstacles they confront. Building on the extensive research literature on this topic, this white paper highlights some important issues the survey brought to light. Although it was not conducted as a formal academic study, we believe it will be useful for journal editors, publishing professionals, and universities.

Our questionnaire was distributed by email to a list of many scholars who are existing clients of our company or are subscribed to our email list, and also via social media and on academic listservs. During the months of July and August 2019, 56 scholars who are speakers of 20 different native languages decided to complete the survey; the majority of respondents had never used our company's services. The questionnaire, a copy of which is appended to this report, included eighteen questions on the scholars' background, their linguistic proficiency, funding opportunities for language services to aid their publishing efforts, and their interactions with academic journals.

In analyzing respondents' answers to the survey, we sought to identify the underlying causes of the struggles that scholars mentioned, with an eye to proposing strategies that can help authors and journal editors better communicate with each other.

**AS MEMBERS OF THE LARGER ACADEMIC COMMUNITY, OUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS IMPROVING RESEARCH AND ENSURING THAT SCHOLARSHIP OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY GETS PUBLISHED, REGARDLESS OF LINGUISTIC ABILITIES. WE HOPE TO USE THE RESULTS OF THIS SURVEY TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE CHALLENGES FACING SCHOLARS WITH NON-NATIVE ENGLISH, AND TO ENSURE THE CONTINUED SPREAD OF NEW RESEARCH AND IDEAS.**

# LINGUISTIC BIAS

in the Review of Research

THE OBSTACLES NON-NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING SCHOLARS FACE IN PUBLISHING THEIR WORK ARE REFLECTIVE OF LARGER ISSUES IN ACADEMIA.

All else being equal, studies suggest that journal editors may be more likely to accept a research article with grammatically standard English than one with poor English.<sup>3</sup> In part, this generally unconscious reaction can be seen as a response to the additional work hours involved in revising an imperfect text, even if the author's meaning comes across clearly. But non-native English-speaking scholars' less-than-fluent writing itself can also lead an editor to negatively evaluate the quality of their research.<sup>4</sup> The scholarly literature has identified this systematic discrepancy as a case of "linguistic privilege."<sup>5</sup>

International journal publishers confront a daunting task.<sup>6</sup> With ever-increasing submissions by non-native English speakers to English-language journals, a trend that is linked to global developments in academia, journal editors are overwhelmed by the number of papers with nonstandard language and those that do not follow author guidelines. For many editors, it may seem only natural that native English norms help serve as a baseline qualifier when making editorial decisions about such a vast volume of material.<sup>7</sup> However, marginalizing academics from outside the Anglophone world can be "impoverishing in terms of creation of knowledge."<sup>8</sup> Journals are potentially missing out on high-quality research simply because of perceived deficiencies in language.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, some non-native English-speaking scholars report being dissatisfied with inaccurate edits to their texts by journal editors. They feel that language editing and peer review reduces the complexity of their arguments and ideas. They also feel that the editing process alters the text to more closely reflect the perspectives of the editor, rather than their own.<sup>10</sup> According to our survey results, non-native English-speaking scholars seek more understanding and control over the editing process and more willingness on the part of editors to review studies in comprehensible, if non-standard, English.

# SURVEY RESULTS

THE RESULTS OF OUR QUESTIONNAIRE CAN BE SUMMARIZED INTO THREE MAIN TAKEAWAYS.

1.

## WE FOUND THAT NON-NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING SCHOLARS FEEL THAT PUBLISHING IN ENGLISH IS NECESSARY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS.

Nearly all of the survey respondents indicated that they plan to publish in English (98%), and that they see publishing in English as an important priority (93%). Unsurprisingly, the most commonly cited reason was that scholars desire to publish in journals with a high impact factor, nearly all of which are in English. Other respondents said that in order to advance in academia—or even to find a job in the first place—publishing in English is a necessity. Furthermore, scholars report that English publications give their research significantly more exposure in the international academic community. Underlying this trend is the increasing number of institutions outside the Anglophone world that require faculty to publish in English-language academic journals;<sup>11</sup> some go so far as to condition government funding on such publications.

2.

## WE FOUND THAT, FOR MANY, THE ADDED BURDEN OF HAVING TO WRITE IN ENGLISH MAKES THE PUBLISHING PROCESS MORE DIFFICULT.

The majority of our respondents (85%) reported feeling at a disadvantage relative to native English speakers when attempting to publish their work in English. These respondents cited various reasons, including difficulties with revising and proofreading their own work before submission, the lack of resources they can bring to bear to help them write their manuscripts in English, and difficulties with understanding journal style guides and instructions. Furthermore, respondents also indicated that they struggle with making their writing sound “natural,” like that of a native speaker.

3.

## SCHOLARS ALSO REPORTED A LACK OF RESOURCES FOR EDITING ASSISTANCE.

One of respondents’ most common complaints was that they have neither the resources nor the time to have their manuscripts properly edited. Almost all respondents indicated that they would be able to publish more in English if they had access to better editing software, or to professional editors. However, professional editing services are cost-prohibitive for many scholars; 64% said they lack the necessary funds to hire an editor except in special circumstances. Instead, some reported using free editing software, such as Grammarly, to edit their manuscripts. Unfortunately, the limited capabilities of such software are insufficient to prepare manuscripts for submission to top journals.

The pressures and obstacles that survey respondents reported are hardly new. Similar sentiments, and potential solutions, have been discussed and debated for decades. However, the fact that the same feelings of frustration are still expressed today underlies the continued necessity of seeking solutions to this problem.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**AFTER REVIEWING THE DATA FROM OUR QUESTIONNAIRE ALONGSIDE THE RELEVANT LITERATURE, SOME OF WHICH WE HAVE CITED HERE, WE HAVE FORMULATED SEVERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOURNALS, PUBLISHERS, AND UNIVERSITIES TO IMPROVE THE PUBLICATION PROCESS FOR NON-NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING SCHOLARS:**

## REFORMING THE CURRENT PUBLICATION PROCESS

As previously mentioned, research, no matter the quality, may not be judged objectively if the manuscript contains linguistic errors. With that in mind, we recommend that, even before sending manuscripts for peer review, more journals conduct an initial content-focused evaluation of submitted papers. Some journals already undertake such a preliminary review, but by employing this strategy more widely, editors can focus their editorial attention on knowledge and substance, and avoid being sidetracked by particular linguistic usages, forms, and varieties. If this initial review identifies scholarly worth in the article, the journal can then request that the author have the paper edited.

Likewise, journals could work to make submission instructions clearer and to standardize requirements and formats in order to remove unnecessary ambiguity from the submission process. We also recommend that journals provide more comprehensive and affordable editing resources to non-native English-speaking scholars, as one of the most common complaints from respondents was the lack of tools and funding available to them for editing their manuscripts. Open-access charges, for instance, could also serve to cover language editing. We believe these changes would level the playing field significantly and ensure that journals have the chance to recognize and publish potentially groundbreaking research from scholars across the globe. One journal's interesting experiment in this vein, which could be adopted more widely, involved a mentoring program aimed at helping writers from outside the Anglophone context better understand the review and publishing process; at the same time, the program provided an opportunity for journal editors and reviewers to reconsider their possible assumptions and biases in approaching the scholarship of non-native English-speaking writers.<sup>12</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## STRUCTURAL CHANGES

Another solution is for journals to adapt the submission process to meet the needs of non-native English-speaking scholars. Journals could adopt a number of strategic changes, such as allowing submission of papers written in languages other than English; authors would only have their articles translated if they had already been accepted for publication. Journals could also ease their English-language requirements so that scholars could submit high-level research in sufficiently clear English, and their work could then be edited by a native-speaking language expert in that discipline after the peer-review process is completed. While similar practices occur in the sciences, they are far less common in the humanities. Likewise, journals could work to establish satellite publications, in English or local languages, in non-English-speaking countries. Articles originally published in English might appear in these publications — and vice versa.

## FUNDING REFORMS

An additional solution is for universities around the world to increase funding opportunities specifically aimed at editing and translating services, so that scholars have greater access to the resources they need to successfully publish their manuscripts. Based on this survey data, almost all of the respondents indicated that their institutions offer little to no such funding, or research funding overall. However, with a larger budget, scholars will be able to more easily contract the services of professional academic translators and editors, thus making sure their manuscripts are in top shape before submission. In Israel, for example, publicly funded universities and colleges provide an annual research budget to senior scholars that can be used for translation and editing services. This policy has been highly successful, and we recommend that similar structures be implemented in other countries and, especially, for more junior scholars.

In addition to making language services more accessible to scholars, universities could also prioritize developing relationships with professional editing and translation companies, or offer such services in-house.<sup>13</sup> By operating at the institutional level, universities can both ensure that faculty work with reputable and high-quality service providers and, in many cases, negotiate more favorable rates.

Universities could also relax requirements that faculty publish exclusively in English. Journals in other languages could be included on the lists of accepted journals in which scholars need to publish.

# CONCLUSIONS

The most striking takeaway from this survey was the cost to scholarship itself. Dynamic and revolutionary research — a new theory of matter and energy, a new perspective on colonial history, or a new understanding of language itself — can happen anywhere in the world, in any language. But the historical accident of the academic dominance of English means that scholars whose first language is Spanish, Turkish, Swahili, or Korean, no matter how innovative their work might be, automatically face a higher bar. Without arguing for lowering academic standards, we believe that **EASING NON-NATIVE-ENGLISH-SPEAKING SCHOLARS' ABILITY TO PUBLISH IN INTERNATIONAL JOURNALS WILL SERVE THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE AS A WHOLE. THE REMEDIES WE SUGGEST HERE, ALONG WITH OTHERS THAT MIGHT BE ADOPTED, CAN HELP CREATE AN ACADEMIC WORLD IN WHICH EVERY SCHOLAR'S WORK IS JUDGED ON ITS MERITS, NOT ON ITS ACCENT.**

## END NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Strauss, "It's Not the Way We Use English: Can We Resist the Native Speaker Stranglehold on Academic Publications?" *Publications* 5(4) 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Jane Curry and Theresa Lillis, "Unpacking the Lore on Multilingual Scholars Publishing in English: A Discussion Paper," *Publications* 7:2 (2019): 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Politzer-Ahles et al, "Is Linguistic Injustice a Myth? A Response to Hyland," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 34 (2016): 3-8.

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting recent discussion of this very issue, see the meeting on "Editing an International Scientific Journal: The English Language Challenge" organized by the Society of English-language professionals in the Netherlands, January 31, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> On the prevalence of such "lore" in perceptions of English-language academic publishing, see Curry and Lillis, "Unpacking."

<sup>7</sup> John Flowerdew, "Attitudes of Journal Editors to Nonnative Speaker Contributions," *TESOL Quarterly* 35:1 (2001): 122.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, "It's Not the Way We Use English."

<sup>9</sup> Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry, *Academic Writing in a Global Context: The Politics and Practices of Publishing in English* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> John Flowerdew, "Discourse Community, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, and the Nonnative-English-Speaking Scholar," *TESOL Quarterly* 34.1 (Spring 2000): 127-150.

<sup>11</sup> Theresa Lillis, Anna Magyar, Anna Robinson-Pant, "An International Journal's Attempts to Address Inequalities in Academic Publishing: Developing a Writing for Publication Programme," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 40:6 (2011): 781-800.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Matarese, "Every Scientific Research Institute Needs an Authors' Editor," (PowerPoint Presentation, PUBMET2018, Zadar, Croatia, September, 20, 2018).

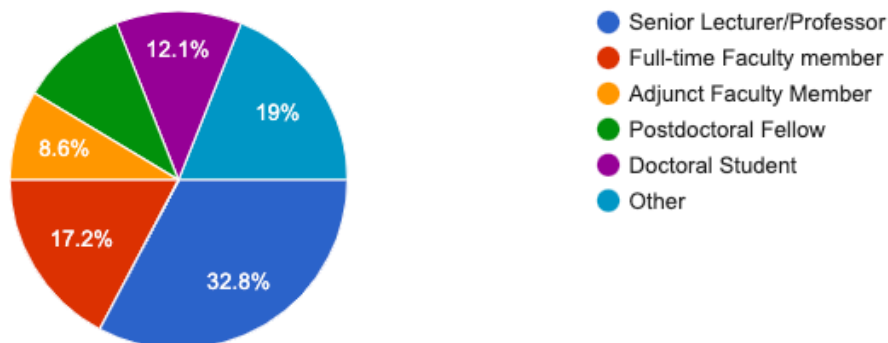


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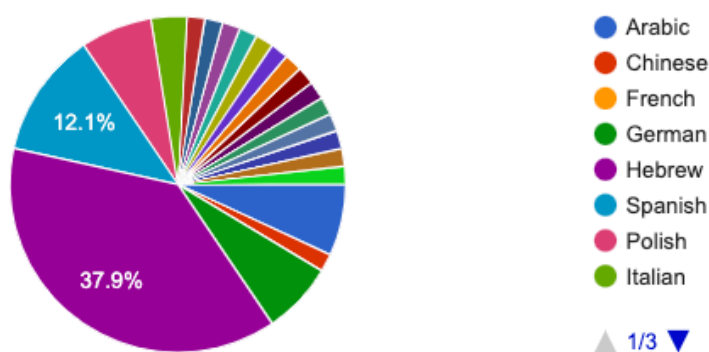
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# ACADEMIC LANGUAGE EXPERTS QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES FOR NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SCHOLARS

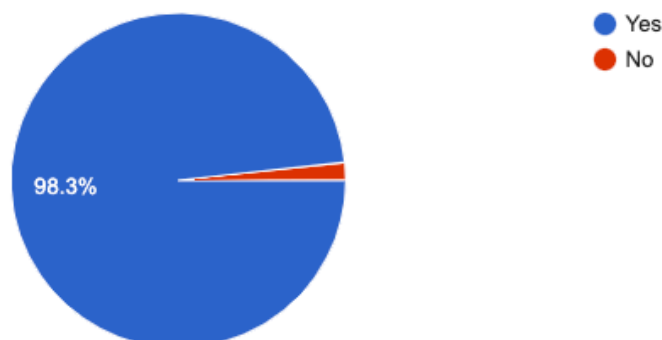
Academic Position (e.g. Professor, Lecturer, Post-Doc, etc.)



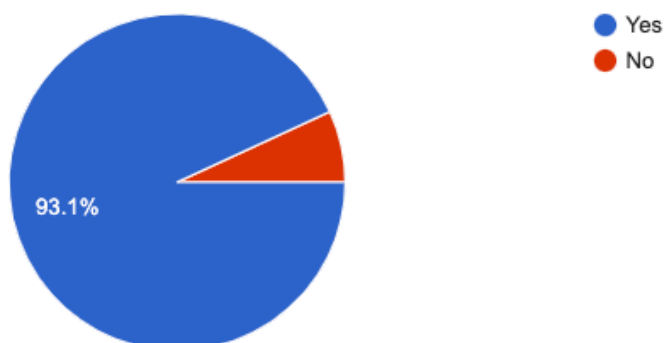
What is your native language?



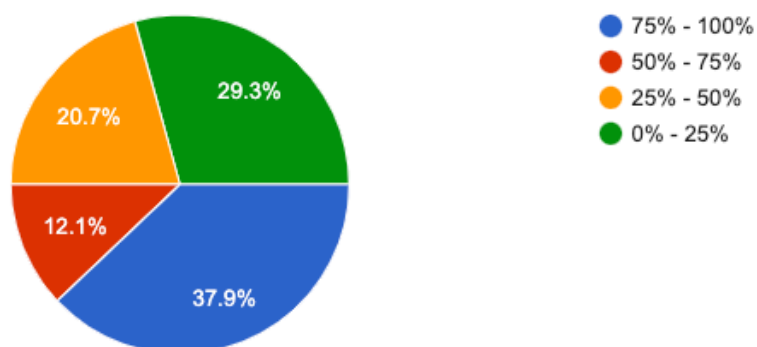
Have you published or do you plan to publish in English?



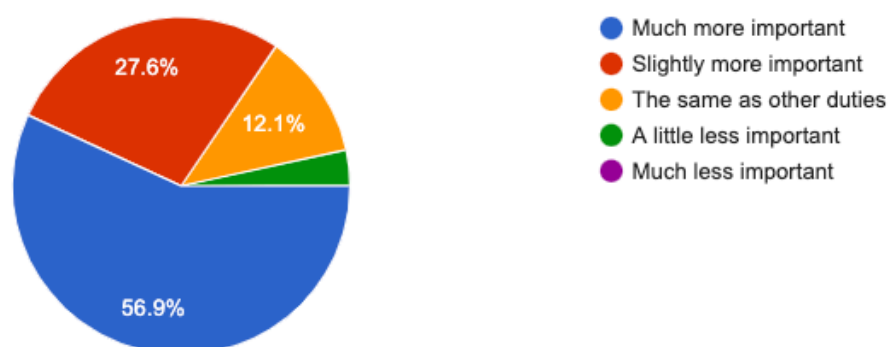
Is publishing in English an important priority for you?



To date, what proportion of your work have you published in English?

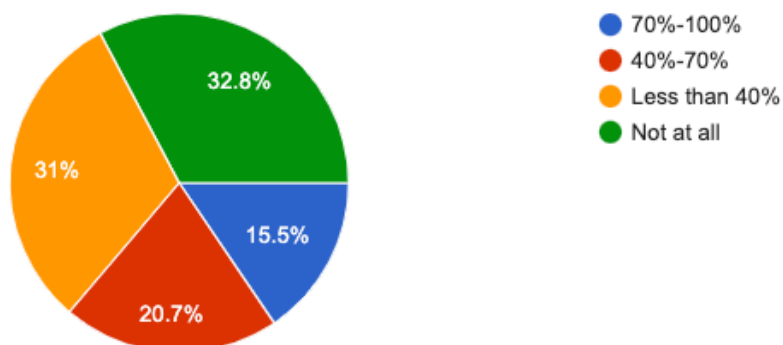


How important is publishing your research relative to other academic duties?





What percentage of your research budget do you use on translation or editing services?



I find interacting with journal editors from around the world



Do you find it difficult to follow the submission requirements of the journal?

