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# Exploratory Research in Clinical and Social Pharmacy

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## English as the language of research: But are we missing the mark?



*“The manuscript would also benefit from a comprehensive proofread by a native speaker to enhance readability of the paper.”*

The phrase above may sound familiar to many authors. It sounds harmless but when received repeatedly, it has a deeper impact on many non-native English speaking authors.<sup>1</sup> In research writing, language is a medium used to convey the discovery of new knowledge. Although research articles are published in several languages, English is by far the commonest language in national and international publications. Many authors of scholarly publications are non-native speakers of English. Unfortunately, many manuscripts were found to be rejected due to poor language proficiency.<sup>2</sup> Poor language is also a common cause of desk-rejection.<sup>3</sup>

Rejection of manuscripts due to poor language proficiency may lead to failure in conveyance of new knowledge, some of which may be relevant to tackle pressing issues at hand. Personally, as a coordinator of research activities in my department, I realise that many young researchers have low motivation to put their work in writing simply because of self-perceived lack of proficiency in English. Boosting the confidence to put their research in writing seems challenging despite having solutions such as proofreading services.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the cost of proofreading and editing services can be problematic. Manuscript proofreading and editing charges may vary by hour, pages, word count or the qualifications and credentials of the proofreader. Although many sources of funding are available for academicians to produce publications, practicing professionals conducting research still face challenges in sourcing and securing funding for their research. Many still self-fund their real-world research, making spending for proofreading or editing services their last priority. Commendable effort have been shown by some proofreading companies who provide free online training to help authors to improve the readability of their manuscripts. Authors of non-native speakers of English could take advantage of these services in an effort to improve their writing skills.

Manuscripts submitted for publication consideration are reviewed by editors and peer reviewers; who perform their uncompensated and time-consuming role while managing a fulltime job. The role of the reviewer is not only to ensure the quality of the discovery of new knowledge, but also the clarity of the conveyance of the new knowledge i.e. clarity of presentation.<sup>5</sup> Clarity of presentation in this context refers to organized, meaningful, and logical flow as well as clarity of the text in order to reap the full impact of the knowledge discovered. When receiving reviewers' comments on the lack of clarity of the text, authors should strategize on improving the readability of their manuscript, rather than considering it as a criticism or personal attack.

There are strategies that non-native English speaking authors can employ to improve readability of their research writing at minimum or no

cost. First and foremost, authors should develop a positive mindset and be more acceptable toward reviewers' comments on language. Authors are encouraged to create 'reading time' in their daily routine to scan through published articles and take note of the language style used. It is also helpful to keep a manual or digital compendium of catchy words and phrases that can be used in future writing. Other than that, convenience editing<sup>6</sup> can be implemented whereby authors can get connected with the right people who can help each other to proofread or edit manuscript at no cost. Forming an in-house editing team has also proven to increase manuscript writing and publication.<sup>7</sup> Research committees within an organization could conduct training programs to improve manuscript writing skills of practitioners who have special interest in research. Alternatively, non-native English speaking authors could look for opportunities for research collaboration with English speaking authors in an effort to produce high quality research articles. They might also hopefully be empathetic toward researchers who are non-native English speakers and convey that empathy in their reviews and in their outlook toward the potential in papers, even while not having a different set of quality standards for those papers and their authors.

In conclusion, the main focus in research writing, at least in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields should be the new knowledge discovered and noton the medium used to convey the new knowledge. However, writing skills and language used in the production of a research article deserves due attention in order to enhance the impact of the new knowledge.

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