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**Writing Features Influencing Non-  
Native English Speakers' Publication  
in International Journals**

## PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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# Writing Features Influencing Non-Native English Speakers' Publication in International Journals

Given that more and more non-native English speakers have begun to publish in English in recent years, researchers are becoming increasingly interested in revealing writing features that influence the eligibility for international publication. This paper, with systematic review as the major research method, aims to outline factors influencing non-native speaker's publication in international journals. Based on critical analysis of previous research findings presented in six representative papers, the research draws to the following conclusions: first, even though journal editors prefer correct grammar use, minor grammar errors do not decrease the possibility of publication, because more attention is paid to the worthiness of the content, which may include uniqueness of viewpoint, high research quality, discursive coherence in paper structuring and content organizing, etc. In the second place, avoiding time delay has a significantly positive impact on the likelihood of publication. Thirdly, research that has a clear social background is easier to be accepted by international journals than research without any social background or without explicitly demonstrated social background. Last but not least, compared with those from America, Britain and Western Europe, voices from Asia, Africa and other non-Western countries are particularly welcome. However, since the present research draws heavily on material from the fields of science and engineering, research findings may vary once other fields have been included.

#### KEYWORDS

**non-native English Speakers, international publication, non-canonical use, writing features, systematic review**

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is no doubt that English is used as a lingua franca in the academic circles around the world. It is estimated that 5.5 million scholars, 2,000 publishers and 17,500 research/higher education institutions worldwide deliver academic publication in English (Lillis and Curry 1). English serves as a bridge for scholars using a different language from their mother tongue to communicate more frequently and conveniently. However, Flowerdew argues that the dominant use of English in academic circles also brings about changes which include changing and mixing of genres, changing sources of norms, inequality for publication of non-Anglophone scholars' works and other changes in the use of the English language ("The Non-Anglophone Scholar" 14-15). Research by Flowerdew also indicates that most L2 writers (the term referring to writers whose first language is not English; while "L1 writers" refers to native English speakers) feel that they are at an unfavorable place compared with English-as-first-language writers in writing for publication ("Writing for Scholarly Publication" 125-126). Some scholars are concerned with "sweeping generalizations made by native speakers" and request "an assertion of rights for writers using English as a Lingua Franca Academic (ELFA)" (Tribble 39-40). The current situation implies that L2 writers should overcome their language difficulties and comply with certain writing norms in order to gain eligibility for publication. Language features of texts by L2 writers may decrease, increase or have no impact on the likelihood of paper publication. This paper, using the method of systematic review, aims to identify different features which have positive, negative or neutral impact on the paper publication of L2 writers in international journals.

## METHOD

Taking the features of NNES (Non-Native English Speakers) writing in international journals as research objects, the aim of this paper is to analyze and discover NNES writing features influencing international paper publication. According to Foster and Jewell, Systematic review is a method of collecting large amounts of information, which meets the requirements of evidence-based research (40). This research specifies several selection criteria to search for relevant papers for systematic review.

## PAPER- SEARCHING STRATEGIES AND SELECTION CRITERIA

This systematic review is based on several research papers from the Scopus database. Based on the research question, we established and used the following search formula to find relevant articles in Scopus.

The formula is written based on Boolean logic with the consideration of key words in relevant articles:

( ALL ( elfa ) OR ALL ( "academic lingua franca" ) OR ALL ( "lingua academica" ) OR ALL ( "non-native researcher" OR "non-native academic" OR "NNS researcher" OR "NNS academic" OR "L2 academic" ) AND ALL ( journal ) OR ALL ( publica\* ) OR ALL ( publish\* ) OR ALL ( manuscript ) AND ALL ( english ) AND ALL ( writ\* ) )

After we had input the formula into the search engine of Scopus, we retrieved 576 articles at first. To identify articles which are related to article publication of NNES, and which might be helpful for non-native speakers aiming to publish their article in international journals, several criteria were formulated to identify relevant papers which would be used for the systematic review.

## **CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION**

Firstly, the articles included are either connected to the analysis of academic writing of NNES or to the comparison between academic papers by NNES and NES. Any analysis of informal writing or non-academic writing was excluded. In addition, articles only focusing on analyzing writing features of NES were also excluded. Secondly, the systematic review mainly focuses on the articles related to paper publication of NNES in international journals. Therefore, the articles related to publication in domestic journals were also excluded. Thirdly, both qualitative and quantitative research was included. Qualitative research, for example in the form of interviews, and quantitative research, such as corpus-based analyses, was to be included, as long as it was related to our research question. Fourthly, this systematic review mainly tackles publication in journals. Thus, articles about other kinds of formal academic writing such as dissertations and reports were excluded.

A team of students was responsible for selecting related articles. Altogether 11 students participated in identifying relevant articles from 576 articles in Scopus. After the selection, six articles which met the criteria were included. The articles used can be found in the Endnotes Page<sup>1</sup>.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

After finding adequate articles, a model similar to "PICOC" was built to extract and analyze useful information in these articles. PICOC is an abbreviation of participant/sample, intervention, comparison, outcome

and context. This framework, proposed by Petticrew and Roberts in 2006, is used to analyze data in systematic review of social sciences (qtd. in Foster and Jewell 40). The formation of this framework is based on the adaption of the "PICO+" analysis framework, designed by Bennett and Bennett in 2006, which is frequently used in medical science (qtd. in Foster and Jewell 40). In medical science, a control group is employed to examine the conditions applied to the experimental group. In social sciences, the "PICO+" framework is sometimes inapplicable, especially in field investigation, survey research, and documentary research, because it is difficult to control variables and distinguish the controlled group and the experimental group. This systematic review is based on the six studies selected before. Thus, it is difficult to design a control group and an experimental group. Selected articles usually focus on conditions for paper publication or features of NNES writing. These papers are usually small- or medium-scale survey research, and no experimental or control group is designed to make a comparison of independent variables and dependent variables. Therefore, some adaptations were made to the "PICOC" framework so as to better analyze the selected papers and extract information. Finally, a new framework - "PICMC" - is designed based on the "PICOC" and the features of selected papers. "M" stands for *mechanisms* which bring about influence on publication. In the "PICMC" framework, *participants/objects* in this research include the editors, the corpus consisting of the published paper and the manuscripts accepted for publication. *Intervention* can be understood as independent variables, which are features of NNES writing, both positive and negative ones. *Mechanism* refers to the effects produced by the features of NNES writing, which connect the *intervention* and the *outcome*. Mechanisms, to some extent, explain why NNES features influence the likelihood of paper publication in international journals - they are the reason behind the publication result. *Outcome* means to what extent these writing features influence the likelihood of publication. There are three kinds of outcomes in this research: increasing the likelihood of publication, decreasing the likelihood of publication, and having no impact on publication. *Context* refers to the field to which the research findings can be applied. This systematic review tries to use the PICMC framework to extract useful information, analyze the information and, finally, answer the research question.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

We used the "PICMC" research framework to extract and analyze useful information from six papers. See tables 1 - 6.

**Table 1. Framework for analyzing the first paper**

Title	<i>Research Writing and NNS: From the Editors.</i>
Author	Gosden, H.
Year	1992
Participants	Information from 154 editors and associates.
Intervention	Cohesive linking of sentences and/or propositions; coherent topic progression; use of grammatically correct sentences; awkward expressions; poor quality of reporting; language errors related to grammar, syntax, lexis and register; clear and logical presentation of results and discussion.
Mechanism	NNS writers may ask for language errors or "awkward expressions" to be corrected when submitting, which might irritate the editors. Nevertheless, "first-rate work" is not often obscured by poor presentation. However, "mediocre" science may be disguised by its poor reporting. When it comes to a bias against NNES, most editors bear no prejudice against NNES. Some editors recognize bias and connect it with the authors' different cultural backgrounds. Sentence structures, use of articles, and inappropriate choice of words may frequently be corrected by editors. Contrastingly, awkward writing and idiosyncratic choices may not be corrected.
Outcome	NNES features, including cohesive linking of sentences and/or propositions, coherent topic progression, use of grammatically correct sentences, may increase the likelihood of publication. Awkward writing, idiosyncratic choices, and "some minor grammatical errors" have no impact on publication. Textual cohesion and coherence, integration of research quality and writing skills, avoidance of time delay, research with clear social background, and good results and discussion session may help to increase the likelihood of publication.
Context	In the field of hard science which is roughly divided into physics, chemistry, biology and some interdisciplinary subjects.

**Table 2. Framework for analyzing the second paper**

Title	<i>Attitudes of Journal Editors to Nonnative Speaker Contributions</i>
Author	Flowerdew, J.
Year	2001
Participants	Information from 12 journal editors.
Intervention	Surface errors; parochialism; absence of authorial voice; nativized varieties of English; show awareness of aspects of language such as cross-cultural pragmatics; display the objectivity of an outside perspective; native speaker knowledge of other languages.
Mechanism	Overall, editors accept the distinctions between NNES and NES. Editors pay more attention to the quality of the paper instead of focusing on the language. Most editors have no bias against NNES, some are even more sympathetic to NNESs and welcome voices outside the U.S., UK and Canada. Editors generally feel that surface errors are acceptable, except for errors that distort meaning and reduce readability. However, some manuscript reviewers seem harsh with NNES language problems. Editors are more concerned with parochialism, introduction and discussion parts, as well as the absence of authorial voice. Most editors allow for nativized varieties of English, except for some inappropriate usages.
Outcome	Surface errors or nativized English have little impact on the likelihood of publication. Parochialism, poor introduction/literature review and discussion/conclusion, as well as the absence of authorial voice may seriously decrease the likelihood of publication. A different and more objective perspective, testing out dominant theory in central countries may help NNES to increase the likelihood of publication.
Context	In the field of applied linguistics, language teaching and related areas.

**Table 3. Framework for analyzing the third paper**

Title	<i>A Contrastive Study of the Variation of Sentence Connectors in Academic English</i>
Author	Carrió-Pastor, M. L.

Year	2013
Participants	Twenty academic papers written by NES, twenty academic papers written by NNES
Intervention	In the aspect of sentence connectors, NES use much more inferential connectors than NNES. They almost have the same frequency in using listing and summative and other kinds of connectors.
Mechanism	NES use much more inferential connectors than NNES. NNES and NES share similar frequency in using contrastive, appositional and resultive connectors. NNES use a little more summative connectors than NES.
Outcome	NNES may use inferential connectors to become more "native". However, there is no hard evidence that writing features of NNES different from those of NES have an impact on the likelihood of publication.
Context	In the field of industrial engineering, electrical and nuclear engineering, mechanical engineering, and materials.

**Table 4. Framework for analyzing the fourth paper**

Title	<i>Non-canonical Grammar in Best Paper Award Winners in Engineering</i>
Author	Rozycki, W., & Johnson, N. H.
Year	2013
Participants	Fourteen best paper-awarded research articles
Intervention	Non-canonical use including article usage; subject-verb discord; verb usage; preposition usage; determiners; adjective-adverb usage; and other anomalous occurrences.
Mechanism	These non-canonical usages have little impact on comprehension, but have impact on variability, norms and discourse practice.
Outcome	NNES in the field of engineering have developed a language that allows all language speakers to communicate with success. Most editors accept non-canonical use as long as it is comprehensible. These usages have no impact on the likelihood of publication.
Context	In the field of engineering.



**Table 5. Framework for analyzing the fifth paper**

Title	<i>Author's Editor Revisions to Manuscripts Published in International Journals</i>
Author	Flowerdew, J., & Wang, S. H.
Year	2016
Participants	Manuscripts of fifteen SCI-indexed journal articles by Chinese doctoral students
Intervention	Non-canonical use at multiple lexical-grammatical levels
Mechanism	Revision types given by editors, including substitution, correction, addition, deletion and rearrangement, happened from time to time.
Outcome	Different kinds of revisions had been made before the articles were finally published. Among these revisions, substitution is the most important one, as it is helpful to increase the readability and intelligibility of the paper. Since these NC uses were frequently revised, they may decrease the likelihood of publication.
Context	In the field of science and engineering subjects.

**Table 6. Framework for analyzing the sixth paper**

Title	<i>Elfa vs. Genre: A New Paradigm War in EAP Writing Instruction?</i>
Author	Tribble, C.
Year	2017
Participants	Published academic writings from four reputed journals of four disciplines
Intervention	Non-canonical uses including missing determiners, lexical choices, collocating prepositions, and other.
Mechanism	English as an academic lingua franca tends to be a new paradigm competing against Genre in EAP writing instruction.
Outcome	These chosen published articles all have some NC uses, which proves that these NC uses have no impact on the likelihood of publication.
Context	In the field of applied linguistics, biology, business studies and electrical engineering.

## **FEATURES HAVING NO IMPACT ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF PUBLICATION**

The analysis of the six research papers we chose beforehand, showed that the writing habits of NNES were much more accepted by editors than was the case before, which was caused by an increasing number of NNS reviewers and the tendency of content-based revision system (Rozycki and Johnson 159-168). Some international journals may accept certain non-canonical uses of native speakers. These non-canonical usages include missing determiners, lexical choices, problems with preposition collocations, redundant determiners and other problems (Tribble 39). According to Tribble (40), disciplinary engagement and the control of disciplinary practice are more important in international publication, because in most situations fluent use of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is bestowed by the mother tongue status of the writer. Most of these six articles can illustrate that editors are "sympathetic" towards NNES. Consequently, minor non-canonical issues, such as subject-verb discord, inappropriate usage of articles, verb, preposition, determiners, adjectives-adverbs, and other anomalous occurrences, have no impact on publication (Rozycki and Johnson 166; Tribble 40; Flowerdew, "Attitudes of Journal Editors" 145). Moreover, nativized varieties of English were allowed or would be improved by editors, which may illustrate that nativized varieties are generally accepted by editors (Flowerdew, "Attitudes of Journal Editors" 145-147).

Apart from NC use by NNES, some corpus-based research suggests that there is no clear difference of detailed language usage between NNES and NES. In research regarding the use of sentence connectors in academic English, Carrió-Pastor (192-202) employs corpus-based analysis, which reveals that NNES and NES are different in using sentence connectors including inferential, listing and transitional connectors. However, such differences between NNES and NES are not so obvious, and there is no clear evidence showing these differences will decrease the likelihood of publication.

## **FEATURES DECREASING THE LIKELIHOOD OF PUBLICATION**

However, some writing habits of NNS would lead to rejection and were corrected by editors for final publication in international journals. According to qualitative research conducted by Flowerdew and Wang (44), revision changes of NNS manuscripts happened in language units ranging from morpheme to clause/clause complex. Revision types include substitution (accounting for 39.4%), correction (29.3%), addition (15.5%), deletion (12.1%) and rearrangement (3.7%) successively. Substitutions

are often used to slightly change the meaning of the text in some circumstances or to correct inappropriate collocations. Non-canonical use at multiple lexico-grammatical levels, such as wrong use of articles or a clause complex which needs revision, may decrease the likelihood of publication (Flowerdew and Wang 45). In addition, parochialism, poor introduction/literature review and discussion/conclusion, as well as the absence of authorial voice, may seriously decrease the likelihood of publication (Flowerdew, "Attitudes of Journal Editors" 137-140). It is worth mentioning that NC use which leads to misunderstanding and distortion of meaning may decrease the likelihood of publication (131).

## **FEATURES INCREASING THE LIKELIHOOD OF PUBLICATION**

From relevant research, it is known that editors pay more attention to the quality and content of the research paper rather than the language (Gosden 126-137). Textual cohesion and coherence, integration of research quality and writing skills, avoidance of time delay, research with clear social background, and good results and discussion session may help to increase the likelihood of publication (Flowerdew, "Attitudes of Journal Editors" 146-147). Some unique features of NNES, such as taking a different but more objective perspective, challenging dominant theories with research done in non-Western countries, may help NNES to increase the likelihood of publication (Gosden 126-137).

## **DIFFERENCES IN DIFFERENT FIELDS AND SUBJECTS**

Compared with social science subjects, in the fields of natural science and engineering, "judging shall be based on general equality, originality, subject matter, and timeliness" (Rozycki and Johnson 165). The language seems inferior to the meaning and finding of the research. Thus, surface level grammatical non-canonical usage is found "frequently" in the research of engineering. The role of engineering is to apply knowledge to solve real-world problems. In this regard, this pragmatic mindset can "allow the discourse community to accept NC usage without any of the heated exchanges about norms or the counter-arguments about language imperialism that arise frequently in the social sciences and humanities" (Gosden 136). Indeed, some "errors" of published articles in engineering seem unacceptable to scholars from humanities. However, these papers were published already. Typographic errors, punctuation problems, word choice, subject-verb discord, and other NC usage could be found in the best, even awarded, research articles. Despite the fact that errors were sometimes allowed in published papers, we have to admit that these NC usages do not necessarily mean that any similar

"errors" would be accepted in other subjects. However, the existence of the NC usage shows that engineering editors exhibit a willingness to accept NC usage, and readers appear willing to negotiate the meaning of the texts with NC usage (Rozycki and Johnson 166). Therefore, relevant NNS students and researchers are advised to pay attention to larger issues of structure, format, transitioning and content rather than some smaller specific use of language such as surface-level grammar. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that this suggestion is for people from the field of engineering and not humanities. If the language of science and engineering is a faithful reflection of reality or a translation of already formed thought, written knowledge from humanities and social sciences, including sociology, philosophy, anthropology, history, and literary theory is more of constructing and constituting thought (MacDonald 3). Since the language functions are different in the two fields, the suggestion may not work out for those who work in humanities and social science.

## CONCLUSION

This study sets out to discuss what kind of writing features of NNES would increase or decrease the likelihood of publication in international journals. In general, it has been discovered that editors are becoming more and more tolerant of non-canonical structures by NNES, especially those who come from engineering and science subjects. Minor grammar errors would not decrease the possibility of publication since more attention has always been paid to content. Voices coming from Asia, Africa and other non-Western areas instead of the US, the UK and traditional Western European countries are particularly welcomed. NNES features such as unique viewpoint, delivering the paper in a logical, coherent and well-organized way would have a positive impact on the likelihood of publication. In addition, editors suggested that authors should do "everything possible (...) to avoid delays", so that they can acquire "the extra time, effort and patience (...) to get NNES researchers' papers published" (Gosden 135). However, certain features of NNES writing may greatly reduce the possibility of international publication, such as parochialism and absence of authorial voice.

There is a limitation in this systematic review because of the relatively small number of selected articles. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers use more databases, include different points of view and broader inclusion criteria for a more persuasive research result. If conditions permit, empirical studies can be carried out to gather first-hand information relating to this topic.

These findings suggest several courses of action for NNES authors, teachers of academic writing and journal editors. For NNES authors, avoiding the errors mentioned above and delivering papers with good content with the features mentioned above would help them to publish papers in international journals. Moreover, making contact with the editors beforehand may help authors to get to know the requirements for articles. As for academic writing teachers, it is not enough to focus only on grammar and language itself. Instead, their teaching should be extended from lexico-grammatical level to discursive level, where discursive features like introduction, claiming, argumentation, transition, generalization, summary, as well as format should be discussed in depth. As to recommendations to editors, it is suggested that the general trend of reviewing should pay more attention to content rather than being meticulous about certain non-canonical uses by NNES. Thus, editors may contact authors to discuss the content of papers from time to time and give space and time for authors to correct non-canonical use in their papers.

## END NOTES

1 For articles used in the analysis, see Carrio-Pastor 192-202, Flowerdew 121-150, Flowerdew and Wang 39-52, Gosden 123-139, Rozycki and Hohanson 157-169, and Tribble 30-44.

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