Getting research published internationally in English: An ethnographic account of a team of Finance Spanish scholars' struggles

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Abstract

Intercultural text-based research has shown remarkable differences in the rhetorical structure and devices of research articles (RAs) in different linguistic/cultural contexts of publication, including the Spanish local context and the English international context. However, not much attention has been paid to the research article (RA) writing process, which can throw light into the publication practices of second language (L2) scholars in particular disciplinary fields and which can help unveil their main writing difficulties. In this paper I focus on the "text histories" of a team of Spanish researchers in the field of Finance who struggle to get their research articles published internationally in English. These text histories correspond to 24 papers drafted and (re)submitted over the past 5-6 years. The analysis focuses on the extent to which they aim to publish their RAs in English, how they cope with writing their texts in English, their success in such a task and the kind of negative comments included in the referee reports they receive. Results show that this team of L2 scholars almost exclusively write their RAs in English and aim at publishing them in English-medium international journals; for this demanding task, they draw on a number of strategies. They are partially successful in that they have managed to publish half of their RAs in the first site where they were submitted. Their manuscripts received a lot of negative comments; especially relevant is the inclusion of a high number of unspecific negative comments related to language or style in major revision reports. Looking into the writing process can be of great help to provide L2 scholars with useful guidelines on drafting their RAs in English for international publication and to gain an insight into the forces driving international publication in this context.

Resumen

Publicar la investigación en inglés en el ámbito internacional: una visión etnográfica sobre las dificultades de un grupo de investigadores españoles en el campo de las Finanzas

La investigación textual intercultural ha mostrado importantes diferencias en la estructura y mecanismos retóricos de los artículos de investigación en diferentes contextos lingüísticos y culturales de publicación, incluido el contexto local español frente al contexto internacional inglés. Sin embargo, la investigación no ha prestado tanta atención al proceso de escritura de los mismos, lo cual podría proporcionar detalles sobre las prácticas de publicación de académicos no nativos en campos disciplinares concretos y podría así mismo revelar sus principales dificultades en dicho proceso. En este artículo me centro en las "historias textuales" de un grupo de investigadores españoles en el campo de las Finanzas que hacen numerosos esfuerzos por publicar los resultados de su investigación en revistas internacionales en inglés. Estas historias textuales corresponden a 24 artículos que han redactado y (re)enviado para su publicación en los últimos 5-6 años. Se analiza hasta qué punto tienen como objetivo publicar sus artículos en inglés, cómo afrontan dicho proceso, los resultados que obtienen y el tipo de comentarios negativos que reciben en los informes de los evaluadores. Los resultados muestran que este equipo de investigadores escribe sus artículos casi de modo exclusivo en inglés y tiene como objetivo su publicación en revistas internacionales en dicha lengua; para esta ardua tarea hacen uso de numerosas estrategias. Se puede considerar que han obtenido resultados relativamente buenos ya que han conseguido publicar la mitad de sus artículos en las revistas a las que fueron enviados en un principio. Sus manuscritos han recibido abundantes comentarios negativos; es especialmente relevante la inclusión de un gran número de comentarios poco específicos en relación con el estilo o la lengua en informes que sugieren una gran revisión. Indagar en el proceso de escritura de este género académico puede resultar de gran ayuda para proporcionar a los investigadores para quienes el inglés es su segunda lengua directrices útiles en la redacción de sus artículos en dicha lengua para su publicación en el contexto internacional, así como para desvelar las fuerzas que mueven la publicación en dicho contexto.

Palabras clave: Inglés para Fines Académicos (IFA), inglés con fines de publicación, retórica intercultural, escritura académica, artículo de investigación.

Introduction

English has no doubt become "the" language of publication in the academia. Most high impact journals are nowadays published in English, and getting one's research article (RA) accepted in any of them is a great concern for scholars worldwide. For Spanish scholars English RAs are the key to their academic promotion and to institutional rewards (Moreno, 2010). The need to get research published in journals indexed in the ISI Web of Knowledge (ISI WoK) or Journal Quality List (JQL) is rather pressing in many fields worldwide.

The spread of English in the academia has generated many studies on English for Research Publication Purposes (Cargill & Burgess, 2008) from an intercultural text-based perspective. This research has shown remarkable differences in the rhetorical structure and style prevailing in different linguistic/cultural local contexts of publication and the English international context. It has been extremely prolific in Spain, focusing on different genres: abstracts (Martín Martín, 2003 & 2005; Martín Martín & Burgess, 2004; Lorés-Sanz, 2006 & 2009a; Bellés-Fortuño & Querol-Julián, 2010), book reviews (Moreno & Suárez, 2008, 2009 & 2010; Suárez & Moreno, 2008; Lorés-Sanz, 2009b) and RAs (Mur-Dueñas, 2007 & 2010; Pérez-Llantada, 2010a). Some intercultural research has also been recently undertaken to explore the possible transfer process of common rhetorical features in first language (L1) local publications to second language (L2) international publications in English or the possible accommodation process to the common rhetorical conventions of the latter (Burgess, 2002; Mur-Dueñas, 2009; Pérez-Llantada, 2010b). This research has focused on text products and has not considered how texts are created throughout the publication process. An approach which also looks into the writing process and brings the scholar(s) into the centre of research is called upon to understand the many ways in which published academic texts are shaped (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Li & Flowerdew, 2007). This understanding, which comprises and should bring together textual analyses in the light of wordface professionals and gatekeepers (Shashok, 2008), will provide results on which to build tools and guidelines which facilitate the non-native scholars' sometimes daunting task of making their research visible in international English-medium publications.

Some previous analyses have already emphasised the writing process of research production by focusing on the analysis of referee reports. These

studies have analysed the type of comments included in the reviews of native and non-native scholars' both accepted and rejected papers (Gosden, 2003; Hewings, 2006; Belcher, 2007; Bornmann, Wymuth & Daniel, 2010; Mungra & Webber, 2010). They generally conclude that comments on language, style or rhetorical conventions are frequently included, but they do not seem to play a decisive role in the rejection of contributions by either native or non-native speakers. These studies are restricted to one source of data, i.e. the referee reports of a particular journal.

A deeper insight into the RA writing process can be gained by looking at scholars' "text histories" (Lillis & Curry, 2006a & 2010). Text histories comprise original texts, second and subsequent versions, referee reports, editors' letters and other information regarding the interaction with gatekeepers (Lillis & Curry, 2010). All this information can allow us to better understand L2 scholars' difficulties in writing their RAs for publication and also to dig into the "broader practices and politics surrounding academic text production in a global context" (Lillis & Curry, 2010: 3). Some such ethnographic analyses have been carried out focusing on the research (outcomes) of scholars in the periphery, or also referred to as off-network scholars (Belcher, 2007): Slovakian biomedical scholars (Kourilova, 1998), Hong Kong scholars from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds (Flowerdew, 1999 & 2000), Mexican scientists (Englander, 2006), psychology scholars in Hungary, Slovakia, Portugal and Spain (Curry & Lillis, 2004; Lillis & Curry, 2006a, 2006b & 2010), or Chinese graduate students in different fields (Li & Flowerdew, 2007). As acknowledged by Flowerdew (1999: 246), "[a]attention needs to be focussed on individual scholars because it is important to discover the perceptions, problems, and strategies used by NNS scholars in writing for publication in English".

Some recent research has placed Spanish scholars and their publication practices at the centre of research. Fernández-Polo and Cal Varela (2009) report on the current use, needs and attitudes towards English of the research and teaching staff at a particular Spanish university gathered by means of a survey. They find that, although the local languages are favoured for a number of tasks, scholars at this institution predominantly spread the results of their research in English both through publication and conference presentations. They further unveil the scholars' positive attitudes towards the use of English in the academia even though they consider research findings dissemination in English to be highly time-consuming and costly. Ferguson, Pérez-Llantada and Plo (2011) and Pérez-Llantada, Plo and Ferguson (2010)

also look into the practices, perceived needs and attitudes towards the use of English for international academic communication at another Spanish institution. They report on the results of a survey answered by 300 staff members and they further analyse the particular practices and perceptions of a group of 10 senior academics in social and physical sciences through detailed interviews (Pérez-Llantada, Plo & Ferguson, 2010). The interviewed scholars seem to feel at a disadvantage for having to read, write and publish in English but seem to resign themselves to the situation and use any necessary means to have their voices heard outside the national borders. The emphasis of this research has lied on the researchers' perceptions and values as regards the use of English in their academic life. It, however, has not focused on the actual writing process that Spanish scholars undergo.

It is the aim of this paper to explore the RA writing practices of a group of Spanish researchers in the Faculty of Economics of a Spanish university through an analysis of their text histories. These text histories comprise text trajectories (drafts and subsequent versions of their papers), referee reports, editors' letters, their answers to those reports and letters as well as their answers to questions on the steps followed in composing their texts in English, and on their views and perceptions. The text histories can reveal much about the challenge and difficulties that seeking international publication entails for them, even if they belong to the expanding circle (Kachru, 1992). Special emphasis is placed on: the extent to which these non-native scholars aim at publishing in English and/or in English-medium sites, and their strategies to overcome potential difficulties in the L2; their degree of success in turning their research into publishable outcomes; the kind of negative comments they get from reviewers and editors, especially comments related to language and style; and how they react to them.

2. Participants and methods

The participants on whom this paper focuses are four scholars in the Department of Finance and Accounting at a Spanish university: two of them are junior scholars whereas two are rather senior. One of the senior scholars has, in fact, supervised the PhD theses of the two junior scholars. They are rather active researchers, attending international conferences, presenting their research at different fora in their field, and working as visiting academics at several European institutions. They tend to publish their papers jointly and sometimes also with other colleagues from the same department. In general

they do not face any financial or material problems of other off-network researchers (Canagarajah, 1996) but they do not enjoy much institutional support through editorial services or other means, as seems to be the case in northern European countries (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003).

They attended an EAP course under my responsibility in 2007-2008. From the course onwards I started to become more familiar with the problems they encountered when drafting their RAs in English for international journals in their field, specifically in order to meet the recommendations, or sometimes requests, of referees and editors. They generously gave me access to all the reviewing material corresponding to their successful and not so successful publications since 2004; we have had frequent meetings and email correspondence on their views on publishing in English, on the difficulties this entails for them, on their reactions to reviewers' (negative) comments on their research articles, etc. Following Lillis (2008) three-level conception of ethnography within academic writing, the second level, "ethnography as methodology" is undertaken in this study in that there has been sustained engagement in the participants' writing practices and context and different types of data have been accordingly compiled.

The text histories revolve around 24 different papers and their publication has followed different paths in each case. The trajectories of each paper were discerned to determine whether they had finally been published and, if so, whether they had been published in the journal it was first submitted to, and what steps had been followed towards publication in English in terms of revision, proofreading and resubmission. Both positive and negative comments in the referee reports and the editor letters corresponding to each of the papers were extracted, coded on whether the decision on the specific paper had been a rejection or a major revision[1] and on the target of criticism following Bornmann, Wymuth and Daniel's (2010) taxonomy. Special attention was paid to the extent to which language or style-related comments were included and the scholars' response to these particular comments.

3. Analysis of the "text histories"

3.1. Writing and publishing in Spanish vs. writing and publishing in English

The informants' text histories reveal that only two articles have been published in Spanish journals. In one case the Spanish journal was their first

choice to send the paper, in the other case their publication in a Spanish journal came as a result of a rejected paper in two prestigious international journals. In one further case, their article was rejected first by an international publication and later on by a Spanish journal. This made them stop working on it and leave the paper aside. Only one of their two articles published in Spanish journals was written in Spanish. These scholars consider that even if their articles are published in low-impact national journals they will reach a wider audience if they are written in English than if they are written in Spanish. As this seems to be a spread view among Spanish academics, at least in the area of Business and Economy, many Spanish journals in their field are encouraging publications in English.

By looking into their text histories from 2004 until the present, it becomes clear that scholars have moved from having their RAs translated into English to drafting the first version in English themselves. Then, when editors suggest it, they have their manuscript revised or proofread by an author's editor. As they acknowledge, they are now able to accomplish the writing of their papers in English as a result of an improvement in their writing skills in English through mainly self-study and self-teaching and also through a gradual engagement in international networks. As they recount, they have kept updated with international bibliography, actively reading English publications, paying attention not only to content but also to language and style. They have, thus, become (un)consciously familiar with some of the rhetorical conventions of international publications in their field.

Also, it is interesting to see that in many cases they do not tend to have their texts sent to an author's editor before submission. One of the reasons they give for this is that it is too expensive and they only want to "invest" in it once they know that they have a chance for acceptance, that is, after getting a major revision decision. A second reason they provide, and as stems out of some editor letters, each journal (through the editor) recommends a particular proofreader or an agency. So they prefer to wait for these guidelines and go through revision only once, trying to save up time and money. As will be shown below, and concluded by previous studies (Hewings, 2006; Belcher, 2007; Bornmann, Wymuth & Daniel, 2010), they could be right in taking this decision as it seems that stylistic and language comments are generally emphasised in referee reports judging major revision of their papers but not to the same extent in reports recommending rejection. It remains unclear, however, whether upon pre-submission revision, the review process would be eased, getting other than major

revision reports and/or whether rejections could actually turn into major revision reports.

3.2. Publication outcomes: rates and strategies

Three of the informants' papers have finally not reached publication in any journal. This has usually been the case of papers sent to journals with a high impact factor and which have taken too long to review their papers. As one of the participants put it "too bad we waited so long for a rejection". The long awaiting time together with sometimes rather devastating comments made these scholars give their papers up on three occasions.

Only half of their articles have been finally published in the first journal to which they were first submitted. In some cases the rejection decisions were accompanied by a recommendation to send the paper to a given journal, in other cases it was the scholars' decision to resubmit it to a different journal, possibly not indexed in ISI WoK or JQL. It is remarkable to see their efforts to get an article accepted for publication at one rather prestigious journal. They submitted a paper back in 2004 to this journal, but it was rejected and finally sent to a lower-rank journal, which readily accepted it. They tried again the following year with a different paper, but the same process took place. They received a rejection decision and decided to publish it in a different journal not included in the JQL. Finally, in 2007, after an arduous task of revision and redrafting once a major revision decision was received, they were successful at getting one of their articles published at the given journal. It may be the case that after three years (2004-2007) during which they wrote 14 articles, they had better learnt to manage comments, suggestions and decisions on their papers; that is, their success may be the result of their own learning both of academic literacy in their field and of publishing skills. Nevertheless, after this boost and other successful publications around that time, in 2008 they aimed for one of the best ranking journals with a very high impact factor, but they received a rejection decision.

3.3. Referee reports and editor's letters: comments, suggestions and requests

Following Bornmann, Wymuth and Daniel's (2010) taxonomy on thematic areas that are drawn upon in referee reports[2], the most common ones this group of scholars have received on both major revision and rejection decisions refer to: relevance of contribution

(examples 1 to 3), design/conception (examples 3 and 4) and methods/statistics (example 5):

(1) The authors need to indicate why their work is so important from the beginning of the paper (Introduction part). (Major revision)

(2) This paper should be clearer and more detailed about its importance and potential contributions. (Rejection)

(3) Right at the beginning the authors need to provide a clear discussion of what is their objective and why it is interesting and how it contributes to the literature. More discussion of data. State clearly what you want to do and how the data is useful. (Major revision)

(4) It is not clear how these hypotheses relate to existing theories. They should be built on more solid theoretical ground with thorough discussion. (Rejection)

(5) Unfortunately, the paper falls short of its goals. The main problems are twofold: the dataset is not adequate for the objectives of the paper and the methodology employed is deeply flawed. (Rejection)

Negative comments on the relevance of contribution and on the design/conception are found both in major revision and rejection reports, whereas negative comments on methods/statistics feature mainly in rejection reports.

Negative comments related to style or language are very frequent in major revision referee reports. In this respect, as acknowledged by the participants and clearly seen in the examples below, "reviewers are quick to complain about 'the English'" (Shashok, 2008: 4) in a rather general way and without pointing at the specific problems they perceive. This is in line with Kourilova's (1998) and Gosden's (2003) results in which most comments on language were unspecified. It may be due to their lack of expertise in this respect, which does not allow them to do so. Or as Kourilova (1998: 111) states, "reviewers either do not feel like doing the job of language subeditors, or they often just have an uneasy feeling but are unable to pinpoint what makes a paper written by a non-native speaker un-English". Following Hewing's (2006) list of possible language-related targets of criticism, in the case of the reports these Spanish scholars got, they are repeatedly to do with

clarity. According to Mungra & Webber's (2010) taxonomy of language comments, they correspond to "not well written/use of English" and "lack of clarity" comments. No specific comments are made on other possible language criticisms such as grammar and syntax, lexis, spelling, punctuation, register or cohesion. Some examples of these are:

(6) The writing needs to be improved substantially. (Major revision)

(7) I felt the paper could be improved on the exposition. (Major revision)

(8) In many places, the arguments are vague or confusing. (...) The writing quality of the paper is far below what is expected. (...) The writing quality of the paper is not good enough. Attached are numerous handwritten suggestions, but even these are not enough. If you need to hire a professional to fix the language then please do so. (Major revision)

(9) The methodological part is very long and not clear. The presentation and discussion of the empirical analysis is not clear. The abstract is not clearly written. (Major revision)

There are also common criticisms on the organization and structure of their articles, to which Mungra & Webber's (2010) refer as "discourse and rhetorical comments". Some examples of these are:

(10) A nice written paper according to my opinion should have a separate part where the authors make the literature review. (Rejection)

(11) The logic of this paper is not concrete and the paper is not well organized. It would be more logical and easier to read if the author(s) can restructure the paper in the following way ... (Major revision)

These comments on language and style point to the fact that referees in this field seem to feel that they need to comment both on the content and scientific rigor but also on how accurately, precisely or how persuasively in their view new scientific knowledge is communicated. Some of the above comments appear to refer to possible cross-cultural rhetorical differences in that the way Spanish scholars present the information may not match the expectations of members of the editorial boards of international journals,

who are very commonly North American in this discipline. It appears that they require L2 scholars to conform to the prevailing rhetorical conventions of international publications in English in their field.

As indicated above, it is when these Spanish scholars receive such language or style-related comments on major revision reports that they look for professional help. Because their institution does not cater for their needs through in-house editors and/or academic literacy researchers, they need to hire professional help, usually an author's editor who does more than "fixing the language" as claimed by Shashok (2001) but not acknowledged by one of the reviewers.

In some cases the scholars have not been very pleased with the work of wordface professionals, and they have sent their papers to different professionals and agencies until they seem to have found one which responds to their needs. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, they prefer to wait to see whether the editor recommends a particular editor to avoid a double expense. These scholars have also undergone criticism on their English once their text had been revised by a native speaker. Possibly as a result, it is now customary, at least in the scholars' field, that agencies issue a certificate, stating that their article has been revised which may read as the following example:

> This document certifies that the manuscript titled "xxx" was edited for proper English language, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and overall style by one or more of the highly qualified native English speaking editors at xxx. Neither the research content nor the authors' intentions were altered in any way during the editing process.
> Documents receiving this certification should be English-ready for publication - however, the author has the ability to accept or reject our suggestions and changes. To verify the final edited version, please visit our verification page. If you have any questions or concerns over this edited document, please contact ...

Ethical issues concerning revision are inferred from such a certificate. The agency seems to respond to the ethical dilemma described by Burrough-Boenisch (2003), by stating that only suggestions and changes referring to the language were included and that the authors have the last word in incorporating them, but yet leaving the door open for editors to consult what the proposed changes were. Although editors do not usually demand such a certificate, scholars who have paid for a service have the means to prove it. They had to do so when, after a revision of their paper, they

received criticism on their English and encouraged to look for professional help, to which they answered:

> We are sorry about the English style but both versions we sent had been revised by a copy editor company: XXX (see attached document). We will try our best for the revised version and we will probably contact with your recommended services in order to obtain the best style possible.

3.4. Keys to (partial) success

In general, this team of Finance Spanish scholars has been rather successful throughout 6 years in getting their research published internationally and trying to become visible in the international research arena. Their (partial) success lies on their persistence and good handling of feedback. They always write detailed responses to every point raised by the referees or editors when it is a major revision decision and even when it is a rejection one. In my opinion, they have been and are really good at interacting with the gatekeepers, duly responding to content negative comments to the best of their knowledge, seeking external help to address language and style-related negative comments, and overall trying to learn from each submission process. They take it as a gradual learning process in which they are becoming more and more academic literate. Nonetheless, at times they feel that reviewers, and especially editors, are too hard on their final decisions. One of their recent complaints had to do with the editor's final decision on a major revision, when in their view of the reviewers' comments would have only qualified for a minor revision decision. The difference does not lie on the amount of work they will have to put into reshaping the paper, which will be the same (addressing each of the points raised by the referees) but a financial one. The editor's final decision comes accompanied by the following conclusion after summarising the reviewer's comments:

> So I would characterize this as a revise-and-resubmit where the paper has to fundamentally change in one direction or the other.
> Please be advised that a new submission fee of $100 will be required with the revision.
> I look forward to receiving your revised manuscript.

Overall only the scholars' conscientiousness together with the financial support they receive by regional and national authorities allow them to half

of the times reach the standards required to get their RAs published in the international English-medium journals aimed at. As a result, the junior scholars can be qualified for tenure-track positions, the more senior scholars' research activity can be evaluated positively (Moreno, 2010) and all of them together can get funding through competitive grants allowing them, in turn, to carry on with their research.

4. Final remarks

This study has aimed at contributing to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Intercultural Rhetoric from an ethnographic perspective focusing on the struggles of a team of non-Anglophone Finance researchers at a Spanish university in seeking international publications in English. They have greatly learnt through constant re-submission processes and reached great visibility through a number of rather significant publications. This ethnographic study seems to further corroborate the claim that authorial persistence is key to successful publication (Flowerdew, 2000; Belcher, 2007), that is, "willingness to continue revising and resubmitting when faced with extensive critical commentary from reviewers can result in publication" (Belcher, 2007: 1).

The numerous comments received on the style of their RAs, and more specifically on their clarity without any further recommendations, point at the need for professional linguistic guidance and support from within their institution so that their efforts find still better results. Close collaboration of EAP linguists and discourse analysts, wordface professionals and scholars may not only "lead to improvements in peer review practice and better research on this complex process" (Shashok, 2008: 3), but it may also bring about better results in terms of publication rates of non-native scholars reaching top-indexed journals. The proposal made by Flowerdew (2000) to run programmes in which peers meet together to receive formal instruction in academic writing and be mentored by subject and language specialists will be very much welcome by these non-native scholars, and very possibly by many others in a similar situation. In order to provide non-native scholars with appropriate support in their research writing practices, other initiatives and training interventions carried out in different non-Anglophone contexts should also be born in mind, *inter alia* those reported by Sengupta (2003) and Cargill and O'Connor (2006).

Finally, further ethnographic analyses should be carried out to explore the extent to which the publishing skills of scholars outside English dominant contexts differ in other cultural contexts and also in other disciplinary contexts. The work of the Spanish psychologist reported by Curry and Lillis (2004) and Lillis and Curry (2006a & 2010) is rather different from the research activity of the Spanish Finance scholars reported here. In the field of Psychology there seems to be a perceived need by scholars to carry on publishing in Spanish and in other languages other than English, whereas that does not seem to be the case in Finance. Ethnographic research based on scholars in other cultural contexts, Slovakia (Kourilova, 1998), Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 1999 & 2000), the Netherlands (Burrough-Boenish, 2003), mainland China (Li & Flowerdew, 2007) have provided evidence on the different writing process that scholars undergo in those specific cultural contexts.

Further research which combines text-based and ethnographic analyses is needed to shed more light on the complex issue of international scholarly publication. Further studies could look into the differences between first and second, or even third versions, of the scholars' papers to explore how the comments were discursively addressed and what the consequences and implications of those changes were. Also, the changes and corrections suggested and incorporated by the wordface professionals could be examined, as well as whether they are in line with the results reported by text-based intercultural research. These combined disciplinary-specific textual and ethnographic analyses are future venues of research worth pursuing. The results should lead to guidelines and resources so that L2 scholars are better prepared to face the struggles of publishing their research in international English-medium journals.

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NOTES

[1] None of informants' papers had been readily accepted or accepted upon minor revisions.

[2] These include relevance of contribution, writing/presentation, design/conception, methods/statistics, discussion of results, reference to literature and documentation, theory, reputation or institutional affiliation of the authors, ethics.