

Working with Multi-Language Authors

MODERATORS:

Dana Compton

American Society of Civil Engineers
Reston, Virginia

SPEAKER:

Ben Mudrak

American Chemical Society
Durham, North Carolina

Bryan Hamman

Khon Kaen University
Khon Kaen, Thailand

Adriana

Romero-Olivares

University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire

REPORTER:

Becky Rivard

American Mathematical Society
Providence, Rhode Island

In a brief introduction, moderator Dana Compton summed up the purpose of this talk: “How can we make the publishing process as positive as possible for all authors around the globe while ensuring highest quality publication?” The term “multi-language authors” came from a tweet by Ignacio Escalante (@RandallIgnacio), who was referring to a comment made by a workshop attendee (Figure). It seemed fitting to use this inclusive, positive term rather than “English as a second language” (ESL).

First, Ben Mudrak of the American Chemical Society (ACS) set the stage from the publisher perspective. The ACS received submissions from 141 countries and territories in 2019—clearly, research is global. Ben discussed the results of a published survey¹ that asked 2500 multi-language authors about the top challenges faced when submitting to an English-language journal. The top 2 answers were “correcting the English text of my manuscript” and “responding to reviewers’ comments.” In addition, 33% said they would like resources for editing or translating their manuscripts. Respondents were asked to rank ways they thought publishers could help, including providing templates for the manuscript format,

suggesting other journals that may be a better fit, listing resources for translating the manuscript, and making the website user friendly.

In response to author feedback like the survey, ACS created the ACS Authoring Services site² to provide help with editing, translating, formatting, and figures. “Let ACS connect you to our language editors, translators, and other experts to help showcase your science at its best. When your ideas are written clearly, you can improve the impact and distribution of your work.” There is also the ACS Reviewer Lab, a course about how to effectively review a paper. This is available in Chinese and Japanese. Other ideas include to providing a template, suggesting other journals to submit to, having clear instructions, and giving sample websites that provide similar services.

Next, Bryan Hamman, a soil scientist and ESL teacher, talked about tips when working with multiple languages and cultures. He started by mentioning how Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, banned Power Point presentations for proposals at Amazon, and instead required staff to write a 6-page paper about the concept or product. Writing is a learned skill that needs to be carefully taught, especially to multi-language authors. “There is an inherent risk in missing research and authors on the basis of ‘perfect language.’ It’s in the interest of the West and Western publishing to keep lines of communication open.”

Hamman reflected on his immersion experiences in Québec, México, and Thailand to relate the difficulties in learning a new language. After a year in Thailand, although he could speak the language, he was far from mastering reading or writing it. Teaching usually focuses on speaking, but writing requires a different set of skills. When editing, it is important to preserve the author’s voice and context. Inject humanity, humor, and constructive feedback with



Ignacio Escalante @RandallIgnacio · Feb 17

Recently, in a teaching workshop on grading rubrics, conversation was about essays written by students whose first language is not English. Somebody referred to us as 'multi-language writers', and I just can't thank this person enough for using this empowering and inclusive term.



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suggestions on alternate wording, if needed. Editors can and should be supportive coaches. Bryan talked about how a manuscript can be seen as a back-and-forth dialogue, a way to work with an author until both parties are confident in the work.

To end, Hamman told a personal experience he had abroad: As a volunteer in Thailand, Hamman was exploring the benefits of different treatments on rice crops. When he had to go out of town for a few weeks, he asked the Thai landowner Mother Buito watch the crops; misunderstanding, she tended to the crops, using fertilizer to help everything grow. She did not understand that Bryan was trying to learn about the effects of different treatments on the crops. This well-intentioned farmer can be a metaphor for the editor who unintentionally over-edits and possibly usurps the author's voice or context.

Finally, researcher and published author Adriana Romero-Olivares gave tips to reviewers working with multi-language authors. In October 2019, Adriana published an article in *Science*, "Reviewers, don't be rude to nonnative English speakers."³ She built on this in her talk about how reviewers can provide constructive feedback without being disrespectful. A comment on the Facebook page "Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped" summed up the problem well: Some reviewer comments have a tone along the lines of "You came from the wrong country to write in our journal, find a native English speaker to sponsor you."

Instead, reviewers should find ways to provide feedback while being polite. Romero-Olivares gave examples of problems with suggested solutions. For example, reviewers

will often recommend the use of a "native English speaker," but this is sometimes based on implicit bias. A suggested solution is to use a double-blind or open peer review, decreasing the chances for a reviewer to make suggestions based on the author having a foreign-sounding name. Regarding open peer review, "most people are not rude nor unkind when they know they can't hide behind anonymity. Open peer review systems provide accountability."

Another example problem is that poorly written papers do exist, and many multi-language authors do need help. Romero-Olivares suggested the use of resources for authors as a solution, as Mudrak showed at the beginning of the talk. Other suggestions to similar problems include developing partnerships with local science writers and translation companies; trying to improve the writing quality before peer review; having an FAQ page for reviewers; and having proactive editors—for example, providing a list of resources for authors.

As we saw in this talk, there are many ways to provide constructive feedback to authors while maintaining a positive author-editor-reviewer relationship, but it requires keeping the lines of communication open.

References and Links

1. Mudrak B. Understanding the needs of international authors. *Learned Publ.* 2013;26(2):139-147. <https://doi.org/10.1087/20130212>
2. <https://authoringservices.acs.org>
3. Romero-Olivares AL. Reviewers, don't be rude to nonnative English speakers. *Science*. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.caredit.aaz7179>