# Identifying Iranian faculty members' needs for training in English for Research Publication Purposes

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## ABSTRACT

It is a well-known fact that academics worldwide face pressure to publish in prestigious journals, especially those with high impact factor. Recently, With the global dominance of English as the language of science, researchers are required to publish their papers in English-medium journals that has posed lots of difficulties for non-English academics (Flowerdew, 1999). They typically go through lengthy revision processes that takes a lot of energy and often reduces their enthusiasm and productivity and many a time their papers are immediately rejected due to poor language and writing style, vocabulary and grammar problems. Consequently, there has been a growing demand for courses and materials in skills relevant to publishing in English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) (Moreno *et al*, 2012). Little is known about the training needs of ERPP of Iranian faculty members for whom writing English is an ongoing obsession. The present study attempts to address this issue.

**Key words**: Faculty members, English-medium journals, English for Research Publication Purposes

1

## INTRODUCTION

Publishing papers in prestigious domestic and international journals is a significant activity for academic members, especially for those who aspire to a successful career. Universities and institutions' decisions regarding faculty members' recruitment and promotion is highly dependent on their publications. Publication, by the way, provides the chance for academic members to relate to other scholars all around the world and to keep up with the latest developments in their fields of studies, as well.

In recent years, the rise of English as the international language of science has increased the pressure on faculty members to publish papers in English international journals (swales, 1990, Flowerdew, 1999; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Publishing in English international allows the researchers to have access to global research community in their special areas and increases the chance of their paper to be read and be cited as well. Scholars' productivity is not only evaluated on the basis of the number of their publications but the number of citations to their works. So, researchers and faculty members who wish their work be widely cited and represent themselves internationally as competent and up-to-date members of their academic community need to write in English (Flowerdew, 1999).

2

While publishing papers in English journals has resulted in a better academic communication in the world, it posed some problems to researchers and scholars in countries where English is not the national language (Flowerdew, 1999; Curry and Lillis, 2004). They not only need to write original paper with novel idea, but they need to have mastered a certain level of English proficiency so that the piece of writing they produce meets certain rhetorical as well as writing standards different from those they are accustomed to in their native language. According to Flowerdew (1999), nonnative English authors are usually at disadvantage compared to native English authors when they attempt to publish papers in English journals because they should not only contribute to the originality of the technical content but need to focus on structure and organization of this content according to the norm of target language which is different from the common conventions they are accustomed to. Failure to notice such variations usually produces a weird piece of writing which meets immediate rejection from native editors. For that reason, compared to native speakers, non-native speakers' acceptance rates are remarkably low that indicate the difficulties they encounter in publishing in international journals.

Flowerdew (1999) summarized some major problematic areas for nonnative English writers as grammar, use of citations, textual organization, knowledge claim methods, expressing attitudes, and so forth. Gadit (2013) refers to thinking style transfer from first language into writings as the main barrier of conveying

message and the purpose of their studies. He also mentioned improper choice of words, use of redundant language, grammatical problems such as switching of tenses, subject and verb disagreements as problematic areas. Cho (2009) found that meta-linguistic features of an article such as general organization and paragraph development were considered the most important feature of journal papers by Korean researchers.

The difficulties experienced by non-native English writers as they try to publish in international journals has been noticed by some scholars in different non-English speaking countries such as Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 1999b) Armenian (Sahakyan and Sivasubramania, 2006), Poland (Duszak et al 2008), Spain (Curry & Lillis 2004; Moreno et al 2012) Saudi Arabia (Fadda, 2012), Turkey (Buckingham, 2008), China (Knoy, 2006), Japan (Okamura 2006) and Korea (Cho 2009).

4

The difficulty, attitudes, and strategies experienced by Iranian faculty members in getting paper published in international journals has been addressed by Riazi and Bahrami (2012). They conducted a cross-disciplinary study of Iranian scholars' in hard and soft sciences as they attempt to get their papers published in English-medium journals. They found that scholars in humanities and social sciences felt to be more at disadvantage compared to scholars from hard sciences. Scholars in hard sciences had more records of publication in international journals and their English and writing skills were generally better.

Hard science scholars had more difficulty writing introduction and discussion sections but for soft science scholars' lack of argumentized skills was the main problem. Both had difficulty revising and editing their papers and referred to

5

small size vocabulary and inadequate structure as obstacles in writing English papers.

In Iran, schools and universities are held in the national language and students learn English as a school subject which mainly focuses on teaching reading skills and overlooks other skills including academic writing. After graduation, these students are often faced with a limited command of L2 English academic literacies and unable to write acceptable English papers, especially those who want to study for a PhD or want be hired as researchers and faculty members at universities or other institutions. Just like other countries in Iran, university ranking is highly dependent on research and publications and universities in this regards impose certain research requirements for their faculty members and those 1 who aspire for this position. Research activities regarding publishing in both national and international journals, especially in journals which are indexed in ISI, and those with higher impact factor are given significant consideration.

Although Iranian faculty members and researchers has been consistently required to write research papers in English and many have constantly experienced difficulty and even rejection getting their English papers published, relatively little attention has been paid to the training needs with regards to writing for research and publication purposes. Few institutes can be found that offer academic writing courses for students and researchers and most researchers and faculty members had never received any formal training in academic writing.

Taking into account the urgent need for English publication for faculty promotion and university ranking and the constant difficulties experienced by faculties, the university I am working in, has decided to offer a writing training course for research and publication purposes.

Just like any course design, the starting point for developing this academic writing course would be the analysis of participants' needs. Jordan (1997) considers needs analysis as the "starting point for devising syllabuses, courses, materials, and the kind of teaching and learning which takes place" (p. 22) .

In order to establish a fruitful educational setting, identifying learners" needs through needs analyses and designing the curricula accordingly is highly important (Benesch, 2001). Johns (1991) emphasizes the importance of needs analysis by stating that it helps teachers to equip their learners with necessary language for their present education and future jobs. Additionally, if needs analysis is not conducted, teachers as well as curriculum and materials developers would plan everything based on their intuitions (Benesch, 1996) and the result would be a mismatch between students" and curriculum developers" perceptions regarding students" real needs.

2

 The present study was conducted to identify the academic writing needs of faculty members in Islamic Azad University, Savadkooh Branch as they attempt to publish their papers in international English journals. The obtained information from the needs analyses can be used to identify pedagogic purposes and design

materials, teaching activities, and tests for the intended academic writing training course and will eventually help them to produce more successful texts in the eyes of English-medium journal editors.

**Needs Analysis**

Needs Analysis (NA) is the crucial initial step in developing any appropriate English course being general or specific and its significance has been acknowledged by different scholars (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Berwick, 1989; Brindley, 1989; Robinson, 1991; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). It is the process of identification of the how and the what of a course through which the course designer gathers information about students' present and target situations (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). According to Brown (1995) needs analysis is

3

''systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum processes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation.'' (p.36)

The first influential model of needs analysis, proposed by John Munby, was called Communication Needs Processor Model. This model provided a list of

linguistic features of the target language use situation accompanied by a profile of learners.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) made a distinction between target needs (which includes necessities, lacks, and wants), and learning needs. Target needs refer to what learners require to act in the target situation successfully and efficiently and learning needs include what learners are required to do in order to learn effectively.

Brindley (1989)'s subjective needs and Hutchinson and Water (1987)'s learning needs are similar in terms of their role throughout the learning process.

Brindley (1989) classified needs into subjective and objective needs. While, Objective needs can be identified through observation of the learners and the situation, subjective needs are more difficult to observe because they involve the wishes and expectations of the learners.

4

Brown (1995) categorize needs into situation needs and language needs. Situation needs refer to physical, social, and psychological context in which learning occurs. Language needs refers to information about the target linguistic behaviors that the learners should gain. Language needs include details about the situations in which language will be used, required competency, learners' reasons for learning a language, and so on. Brindley's objective needs, Hutchinson and

Water's necessities, and Brown's language needs refer to the same category of learner language requirements (West, 1994).

According to Brown five types of Information is required in Needs Analysis:

1. Abilities: Current competence of learners

2.  Problems: Existing difficulties or lacks in performance.

3. Attitudes: Feelings and perception regarding the language or elements in the program

4. Solutions Perceived changes that might bring about improvements

5. Priority: Ranking the importance of elements that make-up performance.
   (Brown, 1995, p. 43-45)

5

This study intends to address these five following research questions based on

Brown's five categories of information in a needs analysis as mentioned previously :

I.     How much proficient and competent they think of themselves in writing Research articles in English? How they have gained this proficiency?

II.    What kinds of difficulties do faculty members in Islamic Azad university of Savadkooh have in meeting the demands of the writing for international English journals frequently encountered ?

III.   What are participant's attitude and feelings towards publishing papers in English journals?

IV.    What kinds of improvements can be made for the ERPP? Do they need to participate in training writing course for ERPP?

V.    What are their priorities and preferences in ERPP?

## METHOD

In this section, I will provide the information regarding the participants of the study, the instrument and the procedures used to collect data. The main instruments for data collection was questionnaire which consisted of five main categories and was adapted from Moreno et al (2012) and was emailed to faculty members of Islamic Azad University of Savadkooh. Given that all the participants were Iranian whose levels of English proficiency were diverse, the questionnaire was given in Persian to obtain more direct information. At the beginning, participants were required to provide some background information such as their age, field of study, their publication experience.

6

**Results and discussion**

Of seventy questionnaires, which were emailed to the faculty members, fifty were answered completely and could be used. The faculty members who answered the questionnaires were from different disciplines including, 10 forestry, 5 food sciences, 10 veterinarians, 5 marine biology, 5 mathematics, 5 mining engineering, 5 architecture, 5 chemical engineering. Fourteen (28%) participants were PhD candidates, thirty participants (60%) were assistance professors, and six (12%) were associate professors. The majority of the respondents were (48

%) were aged between 35-45.  All participants have published research papers over the last few years. Although the majority of their publications has been in Persian, the results of the study indicated that thirty participants (60 %) have managed to publish at least one article in international English journals. None of the participants have already taken academic writing courses.

**Table1.  Participants' Background Information**

| age | | Gender | | position | | Discipline | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 25-35 | 10 (20%) | male | (36) 72% | PhD candidates | 11 (22%) | Science | 30% |
| 35-45 | 24(48%) | female | (14) 28% | Assistance professor | 33 (66%) | Humanities | 45% |
| 45-55 | 13 (26%) | | | Associate professor | 6 (12%) | Natural sciences | 25% |
| Over 55 | 3 (6%) | | | | | | |

The design of our writing course must begin by establishing participants' level of proficiency in writing texts for publication purposes. So, the first question in this study was related to participant's self-rated proficiency in English for academic purposes (in relation to Persian). Majority of those surveyed (52%) rate their writing proficiency in English for academic purposes as lower intermediate and 36% reported that their writing proficiency was low to very low. Majority of

participants (64%) stated that they have acquired their writing proficiencies through paying attention to features of the research writing of other researchers.

**Table 2. Self-reported level of proficiency in the use of English for writing**

| Self-report proficiency level | Number |
|---|---|
| Low to very low | 36% |
| Intermediate | 52% |
| High to very high | 14% |

**Table 3. Strategies used to write research articles**

| Strategies used to write paper | Number |
|---|---|
| Actual writing research paper | 14 (28%) |
| Paying attention to other's paper | 32 (64%) |
| Reviewers' comment | 6 (12%) |

8

Another crucial element of a needs analysis is to determine the participants' previous experiences and difficulties with the publication of English research articles. This information along with the information about their current proficiency in ERPP can be quite helpful in developing resources and materials. The result of the study indicated that the major problem in research paper publication in English-medium journal is related to linguistic features of English writing (38%) as shown in table2. The majority of participants had more

difficulty with grammatical structures compared to correct lexical selection as shown in table.

**Table 4. Problems in writing English papers**

| Type of problem in writing English papers | N |
|---|---|
| Linguistic features of the writing | 19 (38%) |
| Unfamiliarity with writing conventions expected by the journal | 10(20%) |
| Not Finding an appropriate research topic that fitted the content of the journal | 7(14%) |
| Having access to research resources | 5(10%) |
| Corresponding with the editors and referees and understanding their comments | 9 (18%) |

9

**Table 5. Linguistic problems**

| Language problem | N |
|---|---|
| a. Grammatical problem | 40 (80%) |
| b. Lexical problem | 8(16%) |

The section of the paper with which participants experienced most difficulties and required most edition when writing is the Discussion/Conclusion section.

**Table 6. Section of the article participants had difficulty.**

| Part of the article most difficult to write | N |
|---|---|
| a. abstract | 3(6%) |
| b. introduction | 10 (20%) |
| c. review of literature | - |
| d. method and materials | 6 (12%) |
| e. result | 6 (12%) |
| f. conclusion and discussion | 25 (50%) |

Most participants (82%) agree that they would benefit from an awareness of the typical difficulties Iranian researchers encounter in the process of writing an English paper. They believe that part of the training course should focus on familiarizing them with problems Iranian authors in their fields of study usually encounter while attempting to publish in English-medium journals.

With regards to participants' attitude, 34 (68%) stated that they were motivated to publish papers in English and 16 (32%) were not motivated. Twelve of them (24%) felt quite confident when writing in English and thirty-eight (72%) were not confident in their writing ability. Thirty (26%) candidate felt they are forced to publish in English journals. They commented that publishing English papers is a burden which takes a lot of time and energy but they have to that for professional development.

10

Thirty-seven participants (74 %) stated that publication in English was much more difficult language for publication. The remaining thirteen percent of them; however, believed that the process of writing in academic style including finding a novel and acceptable subject, ordering the information in terms of the accepted rhetorical norm of the discipline, and using technical vocabularies is equally difficult for both native and non-native writers and English proficiency does not contribute that much to get one's article published.

**Table 7. Participants' attitudes towards English publication**

| Attitude | Number | 100% |
|---|---|---|
| I feel motivated to publish English paper | 34 | 68% |
| I feel unmotivated to publish English paper | 16 | 32% |
| I feel confident to publish English paper | 12 | 24% |
| I feel not confident to publish English paper | 38 | 76% |
| I feel forced to publish English paper | 13 | 26% |
| I feel free to publish English paper | 37 | 74% |
| Publication in English is much more difficult than in Persian | 37 | 74% |
| English proficiency does not contribute to get one's article published | 13 | 26% |

11

With regard to training courses in ERPP, the results of our study showed that most participants felt they needed to participate in such a course.

**Table 8. Need for training in writing for ERPP**

| Need for training in writing English RAs | Number |
|---|---|
| Yes | 39 (78%) |
| No | 11(22%) |

Concerning participants' preferences for the training course, most informants consider it important for their training in academic writing in ERPP to be focused on their specific fields of study rather than Academic writing for general publishing purposes. Most participants also agreed that they would benefit from instruction on how to write different sections of the research paper. 66% of participants demanded that they require to learn technical terminology of their specific fields of study and 62% of the participants they need to be taught general English vocabulary. 87% of informants stated that they need to learn how to express their ideas in correct grammar and 76% of them believed that they need to learn to organize their writing coherently

12

**Table9. Participants' preferences for ERPP writing training course**

| Preferences | Number |
|---|---|
| Academic writing for publishing purposes in fields related | 37(74%) |
| Academic writing for general publishing purposes | 28(56%) |
| Academic writing for the journals in which you intend to publish | 32 (64%) |
| How to write each section of the RA | 35(70%) |

Table10. Participants' preferences with regard to the aspects of RA Writing are summarized in Table 10. Interpreting results: 88.7%

13

| Aspects of RA Writing | Percent |
|---|---|
| Specific terminology of my field | 66% |
| General academic writing vocabulary: | 62% |
| conveying ideas in correct grammar | 87% |
| Organizing ideas coherently and clearly | 76% |

**Conclusion**

This study examined through questionnaire 50 Iranian faculty members' awareness of language difficulties, preferences, and attitudes in writing scientific research articles in English and their learning and writing strategies for writing

them in order to design a training ERPP course. The results of the study show that Iranian scholars face many problems when they try to publish in international English-medium journals. The participants of the study consider language proficiency most crucial for them. They stated that publication in English was much more difficult a language for publication although majority of them considered English the most important language for publications. Most participants agree that they would benefit from an awareness of the typical difficulties Iranian researchers encounter in the process of writing an English paper. To overcome their difficulties, the results of our study showed that most participants needed to participate in a training writing course. They preferred that the training course be focused on their specific fields of study rather than academic writing for general publishing purposes and that they would prefer to receive from instruction on how to write different sections of the research paper and majority of them admitted that they would require instruction on grammar, technical vocabulary and rhetorical structure of the research article.

14

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16

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17

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18

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19