Writing for Scholarly Publication in English for NNES Researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates academic publishing motivations, experiences and strategies of Saudi researchers from the humanities and social sciences. To achieve its objectives, the study employed the ENEIDA Questionnaire (Gea-Valor et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2013). Results showed that EAP writing proficiency was rated the lowest by the participants compared to other language communicative components. Also, Arabic language is commonly used to publish research articles in these disciplinary fields. Further, two main factors are responsible for rejections of manuscripts for publication in international English-medium journals. Results indicated that there are past strategies adopted by the participants when seeking to get their findings published in scientific English journals. Also, the participants opted for several methods of formal training on writing research articles. Implications of this study are discussed, limitations of the study were presented, and future research directions are suggested.

Keywords: English language, research articles, publication, humanities and social sciences

1. Introduction

English is globally accepted as the language for academic discourse and as the dominant language of international academic journals (O’Neil, 2018). A growing body of studies has explored how the dominance of English influences the attitudes and practices of non-native English-speaking (NNES) academics in various geographic locations with regard to publication in English-medium journals (Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2014; McDowell & Liardet, 2019; Uzuner, 2008). However, there is a lack of studies that focus specifically on the publishing practices and attitudes of Arab scholars. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, scholars from a myriad of disciplines are generally expected by research and academic institutions to publish research findings in the English language. However, little is understood about how the scholars acting in this setting perceive and respond to these expectations. The current study aims to fill this gap in understanding by driving meaningful insights into the practices of NNES academics and how they share the findings of studies that were performed in the Arab setting with a wider English-speaking discourse community. The present study will employ a revised version of the questionnaire survey devised by Gea-Valor et al. (2014) to explore how scholars who operate primarily within a Saudi university perceive the need to publish articles in the English language and the practices they follow to meet requirements. The study will examine a range of factors including what motivates Saudi Arabian academics to seek publication in English-dominant journals, the challenges—both linguistic and non-linguistic—they encounter when seeking publication, and the strategies they typically exploit to navigate the process of publication and enhance their ability to communicate the findings of their studies in the English language.
The attitudes and practices of scholars around the globe have emerged as an important research topic in the past decades (Ferguson et al., 2011). St. John (1987) is widely regarded as having carried out the first study of its kind in this domain. His research examined the publication experiences of 30 Spanish scholars whose work was composed in the English language. Since the late 1980s, similar studies have been conducted to explore the attitudes and practices of NNES academics seeking to get published in international English-medium outlets in a range of settings including, for instance, southern Europe (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2013; Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009; Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011); Eastern Europe (e.g., Curry & Lillis, 2004; Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008; Lillis & Curry, 2010); and Scandinavia (Berg et al., 2001; Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Ljosland, 2007; Olsson & Sheridan, 2012). The majority of this body of research has been based on scholars who specialize in hard disciplines, i.e., scientific and medical fields (e.g., Aitchison et al., 2012; Li, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Luo & Hyland, 2019; Martín et al., 2014; Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011), with relatively fewer studies being concerned with academics in soft disciplines. i.e., the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Bardi, 2015; Bennett, 2010; Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009; Ge, 2015; Gea-Valor et al., 2014). The present study will examine the perceptions and practices of NNES academics in an under-researched setting—specifically, Saudi Arabia—as a means of enhancing our understanding of how academics in this context approach the publication process.

To contribute to international studies and publications, NNES scholars often feel obliged and expected to publish their research findings in international scientific English-medium journals (Lillis & Curry, 2006) as opposed to publishing their research in local research outlets. As a direct result, they may face a difficult decision choosing between publishing in their first language (L1) or selecting the English language in line with expectations (Flowerdew, 2013; Uzuner, 2008). Past research (e.g., Jaroenkhongdach et al., 2012; Uzuner, 2008) has identified eight distinct problems that NNES academics typically encounter when attempting to publish the findings of their research in international English journals: 1) Insufficient funds or resources; 2) bias against academics from marginal countries; 3) lack of network with the academic community in the central countries; 4) insufficient time; 5) negative feedback on the discussion and literature review sections; 6) parochialism; 7) issues with the research methodology; and 8) language problems. Although many of these problems are not necessarily unique to NNES scholars—academics for all global contexts encounter many of these challenges—the list of barriers highlighted above emphasizes the obstacles NNES academics face when they seek to publish their work in international English journals. While the studies mentioned above have provided valuable insights into the problems NNES scholars face when they attempt to publish their work in international English journals, there is a lack of research that focuses explicitly on the challenges academics in the Arab world encounter. The current study seeks to bridge that gap by exploring the issues Arab scholars face when they seek scholarly publication. It will place a specific emphasis on academics from the humanities and social sciences fields because previous studies have found that there is a lack of research in theses disciplines in comparison to the medical and scientific fields (Chien, 2019). The remainder of this article is divided into the following parts. Section (2) presents the methods used in conducting the current study while Section (3) provides the main findings and their discussion. Section (4) gives an overview of the main conclusions and some limitations of this study as well as recommending some suggestions for future research.

2. Method

This study is a part of a larger research project on Saudi academics’ perspectives and experiences of publishing research articles in international English-medium journals. To achieve its objectives, the study employed the ENEIDA Questionnaire (Moreno et al., 2013). This survey questionnaire was originally devised to explore Spanish scholars’ publication experiences in disseminating their research in English and Spanish. A full version of the ENEIDA Questionnaire can be reached via (http://eneida.unileon.es/eneidaquestionnaire.php), and more details of this questionnaire such as its design and validation are discussed in Moreno et al. (2012). Further, the validity of the questionnaire has also been established by a number of subsequent studies (e.g., Burgess et al., 2014; Gea-Valor et al., 2014; Martín et al., 2014). The ENEIDA survey questionnaire was constructed in six main parts: (1) background information, e.g., personal and academic information; (2) competence in the use of L1 and English; (3) choice of language for publication, e.g., motivations and attitudes towards publishing in L1 and English; (4) experience with publishing research articles, e.g., difficulties; (5) current writing strategies for publication in scientific journals in English; and (6) training in research article writing, e.g., future needs related to research article writing. The questionnaire also consisted of 37 items including closed and open-ended questions, and spaces were provided after most of the closed questions for respondents to propose alternatives other than those presented in the question itself. Permission to use the ENEIDA Questionnaire was obtained from Moreno et al. (2013).

Because the original version of the ENEIDA Questionnaire was written in Spanish and English, it was translated into Arabic by the research. Further, three native Arabic professors of English language were also asked to double-check the accuracy of the Arabic translated version of the questionnaire in order to make sure that all the items of the questionnaire were accurate, clear, and understandable for participants to respond to them properly.
Once prepared, the online questionnaire survey was distributed to all academics in a leading Saudi university through the university server in early 2019. A one-month period was given to respondents to complete the questionnaire before stopping accepting any more responses. Also, since the teaching staff members at this university were of different nationalities and thus may have different mother tongue other than Arabic, it was decided that only responses from the 441 participants whose first language is Arabic to be only included this study. The present study will report on the responses to the online questionnaire survey provided by a total of 213 (52.4%) participants in the humanities and social sciences. The principal focus of this investigation will be on the motivations, difficulties, and strategies of those academics.

3. Results and Discussion

This section will present the findings obtained by analysing questionnaire responses as well as providing discussion of these findings. First, in Sub-section (o), background information of the participants will be supplied. Subsection (o) will be allocated to participants’ motivations for research article publication languages. While Subsection (o) will be on participants’ publication experiences in English, Subsection (o) will be about participants’ past and future training needs.

3.1. Background information of participants

This section provides details on the participants in the present study regarding their personal information, academic status, and English for academic purposes (EAP) proficiency. First, the population of this study consists of (75.8%) male and (24.2%) female respondents, with an average age of about 45 years. Also, as Figure 1 shows, (45.5%) the respondents hold an ‘assistant professor’ position, (42.4%) a ‘associate professors’ and (12.1%) are ‘full professors’.

![Figure 1: Academic status](image)

The participants were also asked to rate their language proficiency levels for EAP in terms of five communicative components. These five language dimensions are speaking (e.g., giving papers at conferences), spoken interaction (e.g., asking and responding to questions at a conference), reading (e.g., reading articles about my research field), and writing (e.g., writing research articles and book chapters or corresponding with editors and peer reviewers. As Figure 2 shows, more than half of the respondents assessed their proficiency in EAP writing as ‘low’ to ‘very low’ and in reading and listening ‘high’ to ‘very high’. Also, respondents showed little confidence in their EAP speaking and spoken interaction abilities in English. These findings are in accordance with those reported by other relevant studies (e.g., Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009; Gea-Valor et al., 2014). For instance, social scientists in Gea-Valor et al. (2014) assessed their mastery of spoken and writing EAP English as the lowest while EAP reading proficiency was rated the highest. This finding suggests that more training is needed to improve the low rated EAP abilities of scholars participating in this study, in particular, the writing proficiency.
3.2. Motivations for languages research article publication

For the sake of determining their motivations for their writing for research publication purposes (Moreno et al., 2013), participants in the present study were required to reveal the average number of research articles they produced in English and Arabic in the last ten years at the time when completing the survey questionnaire. The average number of research articles were 2.9 and 7.3 in English and Arabic, respectively. This finding is expected because academics from the humanities and social sciences have been found to use their L1 more than English when writing their research articles. This is possibly due to their ability and confidence in using their L1, and also their research topics may be of interest to immediate audience who share the same L1 (Gea-Valor et al., 2014). Therefore, it is interesting to know which language is mainly employed by Arab scholars in scientific and medical fields when publishing their findings in research outlets (cf. Martín et al., 2014). Moreover, participants were then asked to rate the following factors on a five-point Likert scale regarding the degree to which these factors influenced their decisions to use their L1 (i.e., Arabic) or English when publishing their research articles: (1) a desire to communicate research results to the international scientific community; (2) a desire to communicate research results to the local community; (3) a desire to be cited more frequently; (4) a desire for intellectual development through receiving comments from editors and peer reviewers; (5) a desire to meet the requirements for professional promotion; (6) a desire to increase one’s chances of receiving a bonus payment; (7) a desire for one’s research work to be recognised; (8) a desire to respond to a commission or invitation from an institution, association or publisher, etc.; (9) a desire for stimulating challenges; (10) a desire for the continued existence of scientific journals in the language; (11) one’s assessment of one’s ability to write up research results in the language; (12) one’s assessment of the quality of the article; (13) one’s experience of publishing in the language; and (14) a desire to improve writing ability in the language.

The major reasons according to their degree of importance which the participants chose for using English to write and publish research articles in scientific journals were: [i] the desire to communicate research results to the international scientific community (92.7%); [ii] the desire to be widely recognised by the international disciplinary community (83.2%); [iii] the desire to meet the requirements for professional promotion (73.5%); [iv] the confidence in the quality one’s research article (68.6%). As for the reasons for publishing research articles using Arabic in research outlets, on the other hand, the main motivations reported were: [i] the desire to communicate research results to the local community (88.1%); [ii] the desire to be recognised by the local disciplinary community (80.2%); [iii] the confidence in the quality one’s research article (75.2%); [iv] one’s experience of publishing in this language (61.7%). These findings are consistent with the results of similar studies (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Gea-Valor et al., 2014) on Portuguese and Spanish academics in the humanities and social sciences. Those researchers opted for almost similar reasons for publishing research articles in a scientific journal in English. These findings suggest that scholars from the humanities and social sciences irrespective of their L1 tend to have similar decisions on the use of both their L1 and English when publishing their manuscripts in scholarly journals (Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008).

3.3. Publication experiences: difficulties and publishing strategies

One section of the questionnaire survey was devoted to examining the difficulties that the participants experienced when publishing their findings in English-medium journals. The participants were asked to use a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot) to rate the following factors:

- not writing on a topic that fits the content of the journal to which I submitted the article;
- not offering results of sufficient interest to the readers of the journal.

Figure 2: Reported EAP competence on different dimensions of language use
The findings indicated that most of the participants in the present study considered the factors related to features of one’s writing in English and not abiding by the writing conventions of English-medium journal are the two key elements for getting their research articles rejected by these journals. These perceived linguistic obstacles are not surprising because the participants’ proficiency in EAP writing was found to be ‘low’ to ‘very low’ (see section 3). Also, this might explain the low mean number of submitted research articles in English by the researchers participating in this study which means that more training in this specific area of EAP, i.e., academic writing, should be emphasised in teaching courses in order to help those academics to have their work published in English-medium journals. The questionnaires findings also indicated that the discussion and the introduction sections of the journal articles are the sections that are perceived more difficult to write where the discussion section is the most difficult as can be seen in Figure 3. These results are in agreement with previously reported findings on NNES scholars’ linguistic difficulties encountered when attempting to publishing their research in English (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2011; Flowerdew, 1999; Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Gea-Valor et al., 2014; Hanauer et al., 2019; Luo & Hyland, 2016; Uzuner, 2008). For instance, Uzuner (2008) found that the most typical problems encountered by NNES researchers seeking to get published in international English-medium journals include poor expression in English, limited vocabulary, complicated syntax, unclear modality, inappropriate usage of idiomatic expressions as well as having have difficult in writing introductions and discussion sections.

Due to their poor English writing ability and linguistic obstacles they encounter when trying to submit their research articles to English-medium journals, NNES scholars resort to seeking assistance from different ‘literacy brokers’ (Lillis & Curry, 2006) who are mainly English editors and translators. The findings indicated that most of the participants first write their research articles directly in English, and before submission they have their texts edited mostly by a native English editor who is a familiar with the disciplinary areas involved. This finding is surprising since the participants’ proficiency in EAP writing was found to be ‘low’ to ‘very low’. To better understand this writing strategy followed by the NNES researchers in the current study, future studies are needed to interview both some of the researchers from this study and text editors. This finding also disagrees with previously reported results showing that hiring a professional translator is the most common writing strategy across disciplines including the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009; Gea-Valor et al., 2014).

3.4. Past training experience and future training needs

The participants in the present study were asked about the strategies and techniques that helped them learn to write their research articles in Arabic and English. The findings indicated that three strategies were found to be beneficial by enabling them to get their research articles published in English-medium journals. These most employed strategies are: [i] receiving comments from authors’ editors about my texts (74%); [ii] paying attention to...
the way others write (74%); [iii] receiving advice on my writing from my master’s thesis, doctoral thesis or post-doc supervisor (74%). It is not unsurprising to find that these three strategies are the mostly employed by the participants. This can be explained in light of the other findings obtained in this study. First, as the findings showed, most the participants have their texts edited by a native English editor who could supply them with relevant comments and advice on their research article writings. Also, the participants’ EAP reading ability was rated the highest of all which make them able to read research articles in their fields and thus unconsciously raise their genre awareness of rhetorical structures and linguistic features of others’ writing. Moreover, this finding is in accordance with those obtained in other similar investigations (e.g., Gea-Valor et al., 2014) which found that past formal training on academic writing for research publication purposes is not very effective in assisting researchers from the fields of social sciences and humanities to get their manuscripts published in English-medium publication outlets. However, the findings also indicated that most of the participants (62%) need such forms of training possibly because they have been recently pressured by their academic institution to publish their research articles in international English-medium journals for academic promotions. Also, based on their current need and interests, the majority of the participants (86%) showed preference for training sessions that focused on empirical research articles (experimental, descriptive, analytical, comparative, case studies, survey-based). As for appropriate methods to receive such formal training research article writing, Table 1 suggest that practical oriented workshops (92.3%), computer-based interactive help (84.3%) as well as translation and authors’ editing services (82.2%) are the most preferred by study participants. These training preferences are mostly similar to those of other NNES researchers in other different geographic locations (e.g., Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009).

Table 1: Preferred methods of receiving training on research article writing

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<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Preference</th>
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<tr>
<td>Practically oriented workshops</td>
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<td>Computer-based interactive help</td>
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<tr>
<td>Translation and authors’ editing services</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textbooks with practical exercises</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretically oriented courses</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretically oriented books</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
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4. Conclusion

The current study shed light on some academic publishing motivations, experiences and strategies of Saudi researchers from the humanities and social sciences when seeking to get published in English. The results indicated that EAP writing skill is the lowest rated among the other language components, suggesting that more emphasis should be given to develop this important language ability of NNES scholars from these disciplinary areas. Moreover, there is a tendency in the humanities and social sciences to publish research findings using L1 rather than English, with different motivations in choosing either of these two languages as the medium for publication of research articles. Two factors related to one’s writing in English and the writing conventions of journals were found to be the main obstacles for acceptance of manuscripts for publication in international English-medium journals. The participants in the present study also demonstrated preference for particular forms of training on writing research article which should be considered when delivering future training sessions. The findings of the present study should be considered in light of some limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, the study limits itself to one Saudi university which necessitates a cautious generalization of the findings when applying them to other universities inside or outside Saudi Arabia; therefore, further studies are needed to support, confirm or contradict the present study’s findings and enable comparisons. Second, the findings of the study depend on data collected by a large-scale survey questionnaire; therefore, future research can be focused on more in-depth investigations into the academic writing and publishing practices of scholars from the humanities and social sciences. Future research is also needed to investigate the publishing practices of academics not only within individual disciplines of the humanities and social sciences but also within the medical and scientific fields (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

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References


