

International boundaries, publishing barriers: empowering authors from newly industrialized and developing countries

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Did you know?

- 92% of journals publish in English
- 94% of literature-search tools are limited to English documents
- 97% of editors-in-chief are native English speakers

These striking facts presented in a breakout session at the CSE 2013 meeting emphasize the need for academic authors in developing and non-native English-speaking (NNES) countries to receive English-language grounding in an era of globalization. The session highlighted interesting case studies as food for thought on how NNES authors can be empowered.

One specific case in focus was that of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México or UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico in English). UNAM is considered the most prestigious Spanish-speaking university, with a strong presence in Mexico (39 campuses) and internationally (US, Canada, and China). Why then is UNAM not ranked one of the top 10 universities worldwide? The answer might lie in the fact

that the top 10 universities are located in English-speaking countries.

The bias in favor of native English-speaking authors from prestigious universities has been documented.¹ Although corporate services exist to offer translation and editing support to NNES authors, such services do not necessarily solve the language-barrier problem NNES authors face. This situation prompted the speakers to start various programs dedicated to capacity building among NNES authors.

A “boot camp” course for manuscript preparation, with submission and acceptance as the end goal, was developed for UNAM students. The course, piloted in 2011, is a two- or three-week full-time course for PhD candidates and faculty. It comprises a blend of lectures, reading material, interactive workshops, and one-on-one sessions on the publication process, manuscript preparation, and publication ethics. Students are expected to apply their learning to develop their present manuscript. On course completion, the participants’ progress and manuscript status are evaluated, with suggestions for further improvement. The facilitators hope to make the course a part of the regular UNAM curriculum and extend it to other Spanish-speaking countries.

Other initiatives undertaken to empower NNES authors across institutions and countries include the China Medical Board (CMB) Program in Biomedical Writing and Editing, the Texas A&M Intensive Course in Research Writing, and AuthorAID. These initiatives have many features in common with the UNAM course.

The CMB program, which ran from 1996 to 2007, was based in China with a US coordinating center, and served multiple health science centers across China and other parts of Asia. It involved intensive training in academic writing and editing in China and, for editorial trainees, a subsequent internship in the US or Canada.

The Intensive Course, running since 2008, is a three- to four-week residential summer training course at Texas A&M in which participants from regions across Mexico, Asia, and Africa learn a step-by-step approach to manuscript writing. The residential program offers the benefit of full-time, focused learning and access to the university library resources.

Finally, AuthorAID (www.authoraid.info), established in 2007, aims to help researchers in developing countries get published. This project involves onsite and online workshops, mentoring, grants, an e-mail discussion list, and free website resources like an active blog. Workshops, usually two–five days long, have been conducted in numerous developing countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and provide training in preparing manuscripts, presentations, and grant applications.

All these initiatives are associated with common challenges, like cultural differences and inconsistent commitment from participants. Nevertheless, they can definitely be rewarding to both instructors and participants, while serving the broader noble goal of empowering authors.

References

1. Ross JS et al. (2006) *JAMA* 295 (14): 1675–80.