The non-Anglophone scholar on the periphery of scholarly publication

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As a symptom of globalization and the marketization of the universities, more and more scholars, many or most, of whom use English as an additional language (EAL), are being required to publish in English. This article presents some qualitative data which highlights some of the difficulties encountered by such writers. It first discusses a previously published case study of an EAL writer writing for publication, highlighting some of the difficulties encountered by this young scholar. It then goes on to consider a particular writing strategy adopted by some EAL writers which might be considered to be controversial, the copying of fragments of text from previously published work, and referred to here as language re-use. The final part of the paper discusses various approaches directed towards alleviating problems encountered by EAL writers such as those exemplified in the main body of the paper.

Introduction

With the pressures of globalization and the marketization of the academy (Aronowitz 2000; Giroux and Myrsiades 2001), more and more scholars need to write for international journals, which are invariably in English (e.g. Ammon 2001). Many, if not most, of these scholars do not have English as their mother tongue, but use English as an additional language. The difficulties encountered by such writers (henceforth EAL writers) in writing for publication are increasingly being documented (e.g. Ammon 2001; Burrough-Boenisch 2003; Casanave 2002; Flowerdew1999a, 1999b, 2000; Gosden 2003; Li 2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). Having learned the language in the formal setting of the school and/or university rather than being brought up with it in the home, the challenge for most EAL writers to write at an appropriate level for publication in international journals is considerable. EAL writers are clearly, therefore, at a disadvantage compared to their native speaker peers (Ammon 2001; Flowerdew in press; van Dijk 1994). In order to achieve an acceptable level of performance, EAL writers may need to spend time and money in improving their English and they will
probably need to spend more time than their L1 counterparts in doing the necessary reading and actual writing that is required for the production of a research article. They will also probably need to spend more time dealing with editors’ and reviewers’ comments. In addition, as well as writing for publication in English, they may still need to develop the necessary skills for writing in their first language (Curry and Lillis 2004).

In this article I would like to provide some qualitative data which further highlights the difficulties of EAL writers. I will first discuss a case study of an EAL writer writing for publication in Hong Kong (Flowerdew 2000). I will then talk about language re-use, or the copying of fragments of text, a particular writing strategy adopted by some Mainland Chinese EAL writers and which might be considered to be controversial (Flowerdew and Li 2007). In my discussion section, I will consider various approaches directed towards alleviating problems encountered by EAL writers such as those exemplified in the main body of the paper.

A case study of a Hong Kong EAL writer writing for publication

In the late nineties I conducted a study of Hong Kong Cantonese L1 academics (across the disciplines) and their publishing practices (Flowerdew 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2001, 2005). As part of this project I published a case study of the attempts of a young Hong Kong scholar in mass communication to publish a paper in an international refereed journal. The participant, pseudonym Oliver, recently returned from doctoral study in the United States, was working as an assistant professor in a Hong Kong university and was under a lot of pressure to obtain publications in support of his impending contract renewal. In Hong Kong career decisions are very much dependent upon publication in international refereed journal articles. As Oliver stated, it was extremely important for him to publish in English-medium journals, because all of the important journals in his field are in that language and there are no equivalent Chinese journals.

Oliver had Cantonese as his mother tongue, but his background in English was very considerable. His first contact with English was in kindergarten. He had attended English-medium elementary and secondary schools, his undergraduate study was at a bilingual Hong Kong university, and he had conducted his MA and PhD study in the United States. Oliver was ambiguous about whether he considered Chinese or English as his mother tongue, but as far as academic writing was concerned English was his preferred language, because that had been the language he had primarily used throughout his study. In spite of all of this exposure to English, as the case study demonstrates, Oliver still had problems with publishing in English.

One important problem in publishing, as far as Oliver was concerned, was prejudice against EAL writers. As he stated:

I think Hong Kong scholars to be published in international journals is real hard. I think first of all it’s the language problem. I think the journal editors’ first impression
of your manuscript they discover that it is not written by a native-speaker — no matter how brilliant your idea they will have the tendency to reject.

Oliver resented the labelling effect of being classed as a “non-native speaker” by journal reviewers:

What makes me feel bad is I get letters from the reviewer and in the first two sentences it will say this is definitely not written by a native speaker — they shouldn’t point this out as part of the main criteria for rejecting the article.

In addition to the language problem per se Oliver was also conscious of another difficulty of relevance for EAL writers (albeit less directly so), the difficulty of being on the “periphery” and out of the mainstream. Oliver felt that he was not able to be up to date with what was going on in his discipline because of his relative isolation from scholars in the United States. He stated that when he was in the United States he was able to consult freely with his mentors, to attend many conferences, and to get on a plane and go to another city to discuss with colleagues if he had a problem with a paper. Although this situation is primarily a logistical one, it is also relevant to language, because the opportunities Oliver was missing would have involved discussion in English and even the receipt of advice on his use of language. By not participating in these encounters, Oliver was losing his facility in using the particular type of English used in the target register of his discipline.

With regard to the specific article that was the focus of the case study in question, Oliver spent about 18 months working on the manuscript and its various revisions. The first submission was a rejection and the response to the second one was that the article could not be published in time for Oliver’s contract renewal. With the third submission the editors expressed some interest and said the paper could be publishable with very considerable revision. In spite of expressing interest in the article, the editor rather enigmatically suggested that Oliver might like to consider other journals. Nevertheless, Oliver decided to persevere with this journal. There followed some eight months of negotiation and revision.

Oliver employed the services of a local L1 English speaker to help him with editing and revising. The L1 editor did not find the work he was asked to do entirely satisfactory. From his point of view Oliver did not give him enough consultation on what was required and how the editing was being carried out. It seemed that Oliver expected the L1 editor to be able to “fix up” the article without any need for interaction with him, while the L1 editor felt that his knowledge of the discipline was inadequate for him to revise the paper without the assistance of the author.

Following resubmission, nevertheless, Oliver was told that his paper was provisionally accepted, but on condition that he was able “to undertake the editing or arrange for the editing to be done by someone else following the examples presented to you.” (The letter was accompanied by several pages of the manuscript which had been heavily edited both in terms of language and organization by an assistant editor.)
In addition, the editor again suggested that Oliver might like to submit his article to another journal, one which might have better facilities for doing the editing work required of Oliver’s manuscript.

Oliver again decided to persevere and further editing was done by the local L1 editor, who was again dissatisfied with the minimal direction given to him by Oliver. In the following months there was further correspondence and revision, with the assistant editor of the journal making an extreme number of changes, including changing the language of nearly every sentence. The reaction of the L1 editor was as follows:

In the end, I have to believe that for the author the entire process must have been extremely stressful. Finding a suitable L1 editor, dealing with the subsequent edits and contending with the vagaries regarding content, as well as having to address the editorial demands of the journal editor and the reviewers all represent L2 challenges which seem far beyond those experienced by L1 scholars.

As for Oliver, he was, of course, delighted to finally achieve publication. In addition, he learned from the experience that he needed to spend more time considering the rhetorical dimension of his writing. He had spent too much time focussing on the content and relied too much on the L1 editor to address rhetorical problems in his paper, stating that “when I write another article — the current article I am writing — I will be more focussed and more concentrated on the style rather than a lot of the content and stuff like that.”

To sum up, although many of the problems encountered by Oliver might have been shared by an L1 writer, his problems as an EAL writer meant that he had to spend more time in writing the paper and revising it than an L1 writer would have had to do. In addition, due to his geographical situation on the periphery, he was denied the many advantages of being in the centre, including the possibility of networking with native speakers and developing and maintaining his competence in the particular type of English required by the register of his discipline.

**Copying practices of doctoral science students in Mainland China**

Having documented the publication efforts of one EAL writer based in Hong Kong, I will now turn to another group of writers, doctoral research students in one university in Mainland China. Before discussing the writing practices of these writers, I would like to contextualise this discussion by reporting on a newspaper story to do with plagiarism. The story appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* of August 16, 2006 as a two page spread under large headlines, as follows:

Familiar words: plagiarism stirs controversy at Ohio University

The article describes how the son of a surgeon from Columbus, Ohio, Thoma Matrka, was enrolled in a master’s degree in mechanical engineering at Ohio State University...
and that he had difficulty in getting his thesis proposal approved. As a result he started going to the library to find inspiration in previously completed theses. He discovered that one thesis, by a student from Thailand, contained evidence of plagiarism. The example is given of the almost direct copying of the opening sentence from another thesis.

Original text:
“Quenching is a thermal treatment process for metal alloys that must be controlled to ensure the formation of desirable transformation products.”

Plagiarised text:
“Quenching — a thermal treatment process for metal alloys — must be controlled for the formation of desirable transformation products.”

Mr. Matrka also found dozens of additional pages of copied material, in addition to pages of equations and language from another thesis. Although these sources were cited in the bibliography, there was no in-text indication that the copied material had been taken from another source. Later Mr. Matrka went on to investigate further and discovered 29 plagiarised theses. Although it is not stated in the article if the plagiarised theses were written by EAL writers, the first example is clearly identified as a student from Thailand. The fact that the journalist does not mention where the writers of the other theses were from, along with the nature of the example provided, suggests that they were also EAL writers.

So in this article we have the story of an L1 writer who is resentful of the copying practices of fellow students (including at least one, if not all, EAL writers). It is notable however, that the reason given for Mr. Matrka’s “frustration” was that classmates such as these were getting their proposals approved, while he was being unsuccessful in this regard (although he later succeeded).

I will return to this case later. First, I would like to look at the issue of copying from a different perspective, that of EAL writers. I will base my discussion on a project I have conducted with a Chinese colleague, Yongyan Li (Flowerdew and Li 2007). In this project a group of doctoral research students were interviewed about their copying practices and their writing was analysed to identify examples of copying. This group of EAL writers had a totally different view about copying the work of others to that of Mr. Matrka as described above. These young scholars were under heavy pressure to publish in indexed journals, as it was a graduation requirement. The writing practices of this group of EAL writers involved using on-line published articles related to their research topic as a source for copying-and-pasting set phrases. To give an example, the following is a stretch of text, as handed in to a supervisor by one of these researchers:

Student text
Formation of oxynitride alloys and the Burstein-Moss effect with high charge carrier concentrations may be responsible for sizable changes in the bandgap. [6] ... ... [7]. J. Wu et al. persisted that the electron concentration dependence of
the optical absorption edge energy was fully accounted for by the Burstein–Moss shift. O and H impurities couldn't fully account for the free electron concentration in the films. [8]

In this extract, the numbers in square brackets are citations to the texts which the student has re-used. If we search these cited texts we can identify certain phrases which have been re-used in the student text. In the following extract, for example, we find pieces of text which were re-used in the first two lines of the student text (underlining indicates copied text) (notice that the student, although not acknowledging that this is an exact citation, nevertheless indicates the source, with the footnote in square brackets [6]):

Source text [6]: (in a review article)
The Burstein-Moss effect in polycrystalline samples with high charge carrier concentrations may also be responsible for sizable changes in the band gap.

The next extract is from another source text and contains phrases which can be matched with their counterparts in the student text cited above (lines 3–5) (notice again how the student text acknowledges the source with the footnote in square brackets [8]):

Source text [8]: (in the Abstract of a research article)
The electron concentration dependence of the optical absorption edge energy is fully accounted for by the Burstein–Moss shift. Results of secondary ion mass spectrometry measurements indicate that O and H impurities cannot fully account for the free electron concentration in the films.

This example and others provided by Flowerdew and Li (2007), which they refer to as "language re-use", bear a remarkable similarity to the type of copying cited above in the case of the Thai student so resented by Mr. Mattrka. It is notable also that the Thai student, like the Chinese students, included citations where copying was carried out.

Now, I mentioned before how the Chinese EAL writers in this study had a very different view of copying practices such as these as did the L1 writer, Mr. Mattrka.

To begin with, they were quite open about what they were doing and assisted the researchers in tracing copied material from source texts and explaining their practices. There follows a series of quotations from interviews with the EAL writers. It is clear from these quotations that these writers felt fully justified in their copying practices, although they had different justifications according to the different sections of the research article. Thus copying in the introduction was justified by one writer as follows:

As long as you give the source — showing it's not your work — it's OK even if you copy a paragraph — sometimes you modify more, other times less — depending on your circumstances. The key is you give the source and show it's others' work or results, not yours.

In the methods section the following justification was given. Here the copying is in fact from a paper published by a co-worker:
Our lab has this set of established, successful experimental methods, he [the labmate] wrote it into his paper; when I arrived, the lab taught me this set of methods, then I did my experiments. But he has expressed it into words, so when I wrote mine, I referred to his words, with some modification according to my experiments. Even if I hadn’t used his words, we have generally the same methods.

For the results section, often figures need to be referred to. The following is the justification for copying given by one of the writers for interpreting a figure:

It’s mainly according to content. Things like this, the content is similar, adopt it, no problem, and I won’t make a mistake.

As I said, these writers do not feel they are doing anything wrong with these practices. They adopt these copying practices because they do not have the confidence in their own English to express what they need to say appropriately. This position is neatly summed up in the previous quotation: “adopt it, no problem, and I won’t make a mistake”. So there is an element of fear which is motivating these young EAL writers to write as they do.

The justifications of these writers are based on two facts. First, they are not taking the ideas of other writers, only the language which is chosen by those more proficient writers to convey what is already established knowledge. Second, they provide references to the articles which they have drawn upon, thus acknowledging that they have referred to these other writers.

So are these writers justified in their justifications? I am not ready to unequivocally pass judgment one way or the other. But it is worth pointing out that all of this can be related to theories of intertextuality and Kristeva’s idea of a text as “a mosaic of quotations” and of one text as “the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980:66). If one adopts Kristeva’s theory then this puts a whole different perspective on plagiarism as it is conceived of in the Wall Street Journal article and tends to support what the Chinese writers are doing.²

This type of writing, in fact is not much different to recent innovative uses of specialist corpora in the teaching of academic writing. Cargill and O’Connor (2006: 210) talk about “the concept of constructing a corpus of articles from their [EAL writers’] own discipline to use as a source of data for ongoing language learning.” They also talk about using what they refer to as “sentence templates”, i.e. “sentence structures that could usefully be re-used with different noun phrases inserted.” Lee and Swales (2006) refer to this form of writing instruction as “corpus-informed EAP”. Already in 1993, I myself (Flowerdew 1993) was advocating this form of writing apprenticeship.

Also, it is worth bearing in mind that this has been made possible largely with the use of word processors as a basic tool of writing and with access to on-line source texts. These two phenomena have made writing a whole different activity to what it was in the past. Perhaps we need also to review our notions of plagiarism.
To draw some conclusions from this case of the Chinese doctoral students, we have seen that they are driven to the particular writing strategy of copy-and-paste, which some might call plagiarism, because of their limited competence and lack of confidence in their English and the very high stakes “game” they find themselves in of having to publish in journals published in English to graduate. These EAL writers are driven by fear of making inappropriate choices if they use “their own” language. While some of the difficulties noted in the first of the cases presented in this paper, that of the Hong Kong EAL writer, Oliver, might be shared by L1 writers (questions of organization etc.), in this second case, the problems encountered by the Mainland Chinese doctoral science students seem to be more clearly EAL problems. Although L1 writers may use copy-and-paste in some cases (research needs to be done on this), they are highly unlikely to need to do it to anything near like the extent of the Chinese writers.

Although the two cases presented here are strikingly different, they do have a lot in common. Both the Hong Kong writer and the Mainland Chinese writers find themselves on the periphery. They do not have access to the mainstream, where they might find support from their L1 peers. The case is more serious for the Mainland scholars, because they do not have access to L1 editors. The Hong Kong Chinese writer, Oliver, in this respect is more fortunate in being able to draw upon the services of an L1 editor (although, as we have seen, because he is not an expert in the field, the amount of assistance this editor is able to give is limited). It seems there are degrees of “peripherality”.

Discussion

I began this article by noting the increasing need of scholars to publish internationally in English and that many, if not most, of these scholars were EAL writers. I then considered a case study of one EAL writer in Hong Kong and his efforts in getting a paper published. This was followed by a consideration of the notion of plagiarism and language re-use, first from the perspective of an L1 writer in the United States and then through the lens of a group of EAL writers in Mainland China. I think that in the data that I have presented and the way that I have presented it demonstrates that I sympathize very much with the plight of the EAL writer.

In this discussion I would like to consider some of the broader implications of what I have presented here. It is clear that EAL scholars may have great difficulty in achieving publication because of language difficulties. I am not saying that L1 writers do not also have difficulties. Lillis (cited in Harwood and Hadley 2004: 355) describes academic writing as ‘mysterious’, and rightly, in my view, states that its practices are poorly understood not only by students but also by teachers. This impenetrability of academic writing is likely shared among both L1 and EAL writers. However, I would not go as far as Swales (2004: 52), who has written that “[t]he difficulties typically experienced by NNS academics in writing English are (certain mechanics such as article usage aside)
au fond pretty similar to those typically experienced by native speakers.” I would like to think that the data I have presented in this paper is evidence that this is not the case, at least for the writers reported upon here.3

What positions might be adopted by scholars and practitioners directed towards alleviating the plight of the EAL writer and establishing a more equitable situation? I think there are a number of alternatives, all of which have parallels in the English for Academic Purposes literature.4 In this literature three positions vis a vis the teaching of English for Academic Purposes are posited. First, there is the “pragmatic” perspective, which argues that learners should be helped to comply as best they can with the conventions of the academy (Allison 1996; Swales 1990). Second, there is the “critical” perspective, which encourages a questioning of the status quo and demands changes to educational practices to make these practices more inclusive of learners from second language backgrounds (Benesch 1993, 2001; Pennycook 1997). Third, there is a middle way, what Harwood and Hadley (2004) refer to as the “critical pragmatic” view (Benesch 2001; Pennycook 1994), which argues for helping learners to achieve the necessary goals, on the one hand, but on the other hand, encouraging them to develop a questioning attitude towards what is being demanded of them.5

Now it would seem that these approaches might well be applied to the question of scholarly publishing. The pragmatic approach would be to encourage a focus on helping EAL writers approximate as closely as they can to L1 norms. This would mean encouraging greater provision of academic writing programmes and support facilities (Benfield and Feak 2006; Cargill and O’Connor 2006; Curry and Lillis 2004; Lillis and Curry 2006). Such provision might draw on a range of scholarly and applied work: discourse and genre analysis of academic articles (e.g. Swales, 1990, 2004; work published in journals such as English for Specific Purposes and Journal of English for Academic Purposes); case studies of successful (and not so successful) EAL writers (Belcher and Connor 2001; Curry and Lillis 2004; Flowerdew 2000; Gosden 1995; Li 2007; Lillis and Curry 2006); learning materials for scholarly writing (Swales and Feak 1994, 2000; Weissberg and Beker 1990); advice on how to negotiate with editors and reviewers (Mišak, Marušić and Marušić 2005, Li and Flowerdew 2007), and the provision of editing and translation services (Burrough-Boenisch 2003; Kerans 2001; Könner 1994; Ventola and Mauranen 1991).

The critical approach, on the other hand, would be to demand more equality of opportunity for EAL writers, by, for example, alerting EAL writers to the difficulties and disadvantage of their community (Ammon 2001; Flowerdew in press; Hayter 2004; Kirkman 1996) and the overall hegemony of English (Canagarajah 2002a; Swales 1997), encouraging greater value to be placed on publication in local languages (Ammon 2001; Salager-Meyer 2007; Ehlich 2005), encouraging editors to be more accepting of non-standard English (Ammon 2000; Belcher in press; Berns 2005; Canagarajah 2002b; Kachru 1995; Seidlohofer 2001; Yakhontova 2001), encouraging EAL writers to be more assertive in their dealings with editors and reviewers (Belcher in press; Burrough-Boenisch 2003; Casanave 2002; Gosden 2003; Li 2006a; Ramanathan 2002),
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and educating editors in how to deal supportively with EAL writers (Belcher in press; Canagarajah 2002b; Flowerdew 2001; McKay 2003).

The critical pragmatic approach, the middle way, would encourage training for EAL writers, on the one hand, but on the other, emphasise that there are alternatives available to them and that EAL writers should be made aware of these options. This approach, while encouraging a critical mind-set would at the same time alert EAL writers to the possible repercussions of some of the critical actions. For example, publication in local languages might be detrimental to career development, insistence on the validity of certain language re-use practices might give rise to accusations of plagiarism, insistence on writing in non-standard English might lead to rejection by editors and reviewers.

I should perhaps make my own position clear on this. Researchers in the area of EAL publishing, it seems to me, are in a double bind. On the one hand, their conscience tells them to promote the critical approach and contest the iniquities of the status quo. Reality, on the other hand, tells them that to do so may be at the expense of individual EAL scholars. As already mentioned, to argue for publication in a local language, for example, an argument which ideologically carries great weight, may lead to negative repercussions on the career prospects of EAL writers if they follow this course of action.

It seems to me that it may be helpful in resolving this dilemma if a distinction is made between scholarly- and practitioner-oriented work. As far as the former is concerned, applied linguistics scholarship such as that cited in this paper can play an important role in educating editors, reviewers and academe at large to the negative aspects of the status quo and arguing for reform. A critical approach would seem to be appropriate, therefore, as far as our scholarly endeavours are concerned. Regarding the practitioner-oriented work, on the other hand, here care needs to be taken not to jeopardise the career prospects of our target community of EAL scholars. Given the dangers of the possible negative repercussions of the critical approach, the critical pragmatic approach would seem to be the more valid one for our practitioners.

Within the critical-pragmatism paradigm, however, sensitivity needs to be applied according to different contexts. In some contexts, for example, where there are plentiful financial resources, the establishment of editorial support services can be argued for, but where financial resources are lacking, then this may be an unrealistic goal. In some institutions great emphasis may be put on publication in citation-indexed journals and career decisions may be made on the basis of output in such journals. Encouraging practitioners to publish in non-English, non-indexed journals in such situations might then not be a good option.

Whichever approach is adopted, one thing is clear, and that is that the difficulties encountered by EAL writers, as documented in the literature and as is clear from the two cases presented in this paper, are immense. There therefore remains a tremendous amount of work to be done. On the one hand, there needs to be a focus on educating EAL scholars, L1 scholars, academe in general, and the world at large about
the difficulties experienced by EAL scholars and their ramifications. On the other hand, strategies need to be developed for helping EAL scholars to overcome these difficulties.

Notes

1. It should be noted that there were in fact no examples in this EAL writer’s manuscripts of the copying of whole paragraphs. The copying was limited to the level of the phrase, as exemplified in the other examples provided in this paper.

2. See e.g., Canagarajah (2002a), Hu (2001), Pennycook (1996), and Scollon (1995) for arguments for a consideration of plagiarism relative to particular cultural, disciplinary, and rhetorical contexts.

3. Some of the data presented in this paper, along with some other related material, was presented at an international conference (“Publishing and Presenting Research Internationally: Issues for speakers of English as an Additional Language”, University of La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain, January 11–13, 2007). In the closing session of the conference Swales in fact stated that his claim had perhaps been too strong.

4. By English for Academic Purposes I am referring to the whole enterprise of preparing learners to study in English, of which publication is only one aspect.

5. This position was in fact already argued for in 1994 by Pennycook (1994:317).

References


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