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CHALLENGES FACED BY NON-NATIVE WRITERS IN PUBLISHING PAPERS IN REPUTED ENGLISH LANGUAGE JOURNALS

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ABSTRACT

Publication of a paper or article in a journal is a common practice. However, publication in a peer reviewed online journal is more difficult due to journals' guidelines and publication criteria. But, publication of a paper of English language seems to be extremely difficult in reputed or highly indexed journals. Every researcher or writer faces problems in quality publications, but a non-native author of English language related papers faces huge problems due to probability of manuscript rejection for many reasons including 'non-native' case. It has been felt that some editors out rightly reject one's manuscript without giving due attention that deprives the author of a second stage review of his manuscript. There are many publishing criteria for considerations of sending a manuscript for 'peer- reviews' in disciplines like medical sciences, sciences and computer sciences where non-native authors' papers are easily published despite the language quality which may not be at par. On the other hand, despite quality content and appropriate methodology, papers tend to get rejected at first and later peer review stage possibly due to the non-native issue. In other words, ownership of English seems to become a problem in consideration of even a genuine manuscript. The present paper is a qualitative-analytical study into challenges which non-native writers face in the process of publication of their manuscripts

in the field on English language or English language education. Data gathered through interviews have been thematically analyzed, and duly supported by the literature review. The findings will support the future authors to be alert while submitting manuscripts to reputed journals, avoid rejection and possible publications.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education focuses on teaching as well research. In other words, research along with teaching is always welcome and appreciated. On the other hand, teaching based researches such as action research are also an important component of academics which may attribute to intellectual grooming, research related growth and professional development. Most importantly, quality research publication is one of the indicators of academic excellence, and rightly considered as main tool of development of research-based knowledge (Ligthelm & Koekemoer, 2009). Writing for academic journals is considered a highly competitive and intellectual activity which follows certain tough criteria and standard as regards to selection of a research paper for publication. Publications of papers related to English language/English language education becomes more difficult as some editors check the language quality and out rightly reject the manuscript without sending for second stage review. Hence, it should be kept in mind that the submitted manuscript can match a good standard if the language is not of a very high quality, expressive enough, however. Moreover, the language style of second language writers always differ from the native ones.

Purpose of the study

The need of research in the present area was felt by the researchers as personal experience. It is really very challenging to get papers published in reputed top journals. However, it becomes harder to succeed in publication if the author is non-native. It seems that the editors develop a biased approach towards writing of second language authors even without reading the manuscript. And, if the papers are accepted, there is a mandatory comment to get the paper checked by a native speaker, the native speaker might not be able to produce even single paper of quality, though. Such issues motivated the authors to undertake such a study which could explore certain phenomenon in the present context.

Problem statement

Research and publications are inseparable and essential activity in the domain of higher education without which an individual can neither earn a higher degree nor prove his accomplishment in academics. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that publishing an English language paper in reputed journals is also not an easy task especially when the author belongs to non-native speaker category. Despite the fact that all journals have prescribed criteria, some non-native researchers of English language/linguistics have a rough idea that they pass through a tougher

scrutiny due to the reason that they are not the native speakers/writers. However, it is equally difficult to validate such perceptions because in other disciplines such as sciences, medical and computer researches, Indian and Chinese researchers have already taken the lead.

Problems in publishing

There are many problems and obstacles in the process of writing a manuscript, submitting and finally getting through. Certain procedures are involved in the form of approval from a board of technical and/or scientific committee which is carefully constituted by renowned journals. The members of this committee minutely peruse the research paper before publication and give its report. Blind peer-review system makes the selection criteria transparent.

The scientific and technical committees review the paper individually and submit their report about the quality, standard and authenticity of paper. Sometimes, the paper is published on their recommendations, but in case it is not publishable, the paper is rejected with proper feedback and suggestions of various types. After the submission of technical/scientific committee's report, the decision for publishing the paper or not publishing is announced. It is important to understand that there could be several reasons behind a rejection. If someone faces an issue, it is not specific with him. It's a common issue associated with manuscript rejection at *EJIS* and other top notch journals mainly due to insufficient theoretical contribution (Venkatesh, 2006; Straub, 2009).

Researchers like Flower dew (2001) have studied sensitive issues like the handling editors' attitude and approach to the contributions made by the nonnative writers. Scholars from non-native countries have felt certain indifferent attitudes of some native editors. Recently, one of the authors of this paper was assigned a responsibility of the article editor, and when he went through the previous editors, he found that two non-native editors have accepted with minor and major revisions, while a native editor has rejected the manuscript. As a result, the handling editor has sent the manuscript to the fourth editor for feedback.

Ham brick (2007) strongly adds that reviewers and editors sometimes make ambiguous reference to inadequate contribution to theoretical framework as one major cause of manuscript rejection. According to Khadilkar (2018), 'on average, most top journals have nearly 80% rejection rates.' Around 70% of submissions to the high profile journals are rejected without having been sent for second stage reviews by peer reviewers (Hamel 2007). It has been claimed that many leading journals usually receive papers that are out of the journals' scopes.

Journals have their own criteria of acceptability for publication and there are many reasons of rejection some of which are: out of scope, irrational or lacking rational of research, lacking innovation or justification of topic, poor methodology

or weak research design, poor English language skill, plagiarism, ethical issues and conflict of interest. So, the common grounds as far as transpired in previous studies are mostly related to academic writing style, which, in many cases, is not up to the mark. Poor grammar, lapses in spellings, lack of flow and faulty sentence structure are main areas of expressional mistakes in presentation. Plagiarism, very common or repetitive topic that has been researched again and again or the topic which is far beyond the interest of scholarly readers interest are also reasons of rejection.

Role of English language skills in acceptance of articles for publication

Writers who try to publish their paper in international journals should be competent in English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Related and non-related set of language challenges encountered by the writers show how difficult it is to handle the current situation. Grammar learning is very important, it develop skills and information. It helps the writers to comprehend their work (Hyland, 2003). Correct sentence structure of written piece of work conveys meaning from writer to reader. Grammatical errors must be removed from your writing and provide readers clear communication, (Phillip son, 2001). English language offers the writers its own benefits. English helps scholars from having to re-edit publication (Genc &Bada, 2010).

Learners of English as EFL/ESL find it an attractive idea to use English in their writing. Sometimes both ESL/ESL learners want that their English should be neutral from British, American, Canadian and Australian English (Viereck, 1996). It is acknowledged that English is the language for many international scholarly journals and this trend is increasing. Academic writing is also needed to publish paper in international journal. International journals community may know author's work well. If not, writers work will deprive the opportunity of paper publishing in international journals (Celce-Murcia &Melntosh, 1991). Azizah and Budi man (2017) pointed out towards challenges of writing papers in English faced by authors in Indonesia. Problems in writing for scholarly publication in English was raised by Flower dew (1999) in the context of Hong Kong.

Significance of the study

Higher education focuses on quality research and innovation. Research publication requires hard work, critical and analytical skill, qualification, vision and insight, expertise and command over language in which the paper is written. It happens sometime that the researcher has great ideas but poor communication, presentation and writing skill mars all elevated ideas. Rejection of such poorly presented and written paper is predestined by high profile journals.

Many studies and investigations have justified rejection of submitted manuscript due to formatting related issues. In addition, lack of novelty, poor study design,

inadequate method description, lack of focus and inappropriate/inadequate literature review lead to rejection. Besides, it has also been noticed that overstating the implications of the results, substandard academic writing skills and lack of command over the knowledge of English language/grammar also contribute to failures in publication process (Khadilkar, 2018).

Though, rejection de-motivates each author yet for novice researchers, the disappointment of rejection may be too serious. (Gopaldas, 2016).

Some authors try to justify the need for duplication of researches saying that the research problem has not previously taken up in their country, however the work has already been done in the past no matter it was conducted abroad. (Lillis & Curry, 2010).

Rationale of study

Many research scholars, professors, academicians and research analysts could not meet up their quest and expectations as regards to their research publications on one ground or another. The study is necessary to probe into the reasons of rejection and finding its solution so that the EFL scholars can know parameters of their research writing and the yardstick of qualification of some piece of research writing to be worth publishing. The results, conclusion and recommendations of this study highlight causes of this problem and how to avert it. After having reviewed the existing literature or the previous studies on the reasons for rejection of manuscripts, the researcher has found the gap between the existing studies and the present proposed research study that there is a need of English language writing skills which are predominantly indispensable for authors of writing research articles or academic writing.

Scope of study

Since the study discusses pros and cons of criteria of research publication in high profile journals, it has great scope for EFL scholars in exploring problems of publication and finding the solution to the problem of manuscript rejection. This study is going to be helpful and resourceful for the aspirants of ESL/EFL research scholars who have great flare and yearning to get their research papers or articles which can be published in highly ranked or popular journals. The study is also going to encourage new and old research writer who want to explore research related issues pertaining to EFL research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing a paper for publication is a difficult task faced by the scholars (Fathelrahman, 2015). Arab learners learn EFL (English as a foreign language) because forming a good piece of writing requires not only high proficiency of the foreign language, linguistic rules but also good cognitive skills in organizing and

presenting ideas. Writing is a difficult skill for most of EFL learners (Wajnryb,1990). The main reason for the rejections of research papers is the quality of the foreign language that is used in the research papers (Shaikh, 2016). Ågerfalk (2014) contends that a paper must make a substantial contribution to knowledge then it can be accepted for publication. In other words, novelty is required. An article can be rejected because of problems with the research method such as, the paper shows a poorly conducted research and was insufficient. The literature review has not covered the study questions and the paper has poor methodology. Sample too small in size may be problematic. If statistics are inappropriate the analysis will be weak. If the study focuses on the routine issues, there is a greater chance of rejection. (Luttge, 2011).

Most high profile journals prefer plain English style (Hamel, 2007) which readers can read and understand the paper in a single reading (Ammon, 2001). Many editors checks the title and the subject on which the research has been based (Gopaldas, 2016).

Reasons for rejection

Bradbury (2012) analyzed popular reasons for rejection revealed many reasons including poor methodology, routine information and poor scientific content existing in the literature. Rejection doesn't always mean that the submitted manuscript was poorly written. Among other reasons of rejection may include: less suited for the journal readership. Hence, it is important to choose the target journal wisely.

The rates of manuscript rejection vary between 80 and 85%. Bradbury (2012) revealed that 62% of papers have been rejected at least once before acceptance. Therefore, there is no point becoming sad and disappointed if someone's manuscript is rejected.

Based on rejection notes, it was suggested that researchers should properly study the reviewers' comments and try to rectify. Main reasons include paper quality as well as journal suitability (Griffiths and Norman, 2016).

Methodological issues

Methodological flaws often lead to manuscript rejection. (Griffiths and Norman, 2016). We have noted that mostly those EFL papers are published which have incorporated different approaches of research. It is also required to ensure that the research aims and questions are clearly formulated, presented and accordingly tested. (Ahlstrom, 2012).

A 'cross-sectional prospective study' actually does not work efficiently, and described as a 'phenomenology' which rely on a simple thematic

analysis.(Bradbury, 2012). Manuscript rejection is also attributed to sampling, experimental and controlled groups or comparative analysis like t-test or f-test (ANCOVA) (Griffiths and Norman, 2016).

In a qualitative work, absence of theoretical framework or novelty issue becomes the reason of rejection in addition to research questions, methods, data analysis etc. (Gopaldas, 2016). Another Quite many papers do not pass the benchmarking of standardized methods that can ensure the research credibility and the results (Ahlstrom, 2012).

Absence or lack of study justification

Justification of the study undertaken is an essential component. It has been noted that some papers get rejected due to poorly-argued literature reviews without dealing with the research gap which should automatically appear through the reviewed literature/studies. The literature review provides the rationale and the scope (Bradbury, 2012). The literature review must demonstrate what has been done earlier which means what the audience already know. It must include latest studies, properly cited. The quality of review should ensure quality evidence of existing literature and prospects due to the undertaken study. Studies carried out in English should avoid unless otherwise essential to cite studies existing in non-English literature. (Gopaldas, 2016).

Plagiarism and citations

Plagiarism is an academic issue which is unethical in nature. All submissions to good journals are checked on reliable software of plagiarism check or similarity index. (Griffiths and Norman 2016). It is equally important for authors to avoid plagiarism, and do prior plagiarism-check before submitting to any journal. According to Ahlstrom (2012), papers usually rejected due to plagiarism have high similarity indices (according to criteria set by different journals. Some journals demand zero plagiarism.

Turn it in is a guide and it shows returned percentage of written material. Percentage below 15% would probably show that plagiarism is not present. If plagiarism is above 15% of matching text then it is dangerous for the writers. If plagiarism is over 25% (yellow, orange, or red) it will be more dangerous. Plagiarism is a “wrong act” and stealing of others publication” stealing of another author’s ideas and presenting them as one’s own original work. Plagiarism is an educational dishonesty. There is a lack of clear – cut-rules on what percentage of plagiarism is accepted for publication. Usually a text similarity below 15% is acceptable by the reviewers. Similarity of 25% is considered as high plagiarism. Reader wants easy, understandable and well written information and the writer should provide real source of information. The writer should not take the advantage of others’ work without citing honestly.

Some writers face difficulties in citing references in their academic work. If they don't properly cite, the writing may fall under plagiarized material. Therefore, they must adhere to a specific style or format such as APA Manual Guide (6TH Edition). (2010). Writers should judge materials in their researches. They should cite content consistently using one style such as manual MLA or Chicago etc. From the last 50 years citation study is regarded as a parameter for assessing the quality of research publications in scientific or social science journals. (Gans and Shepherd 1994).

English grammar and expression

Readership of English language journals is huge. Therefore English is important. Since English is non-native language for most of English speakers, good academic writing and grammar error free papers are always important. Seven % of the submitted manuscripts in 2015 were roughly rejected because of poor expression in English (Griffiths and Norman 2016). Some scholars advice that professional language editing service may be availed of prior to submission to avoid rejection due to language (Ahlstrom, 2012). Edanz and Tang (2016) also hinted at the same point, and added that editing service providers play crucial roles in publication process.

Many new writers complain that they cannot sit down to write a few thousand words because they are suffering from writer's block (Cho, 2004). Unfortunately, for many writing in English will be tough and challenging especially to those who don't practice it regularly. Powell (2012) in his landmark writing clarified a few crucial points saying, "Non-native English speakers face challenges when trying to publish". However, he referred to some resources that can provide help.

Role of academic writing

Writing should be in a more appropriate manner, writing skills can be improved through workshops and feedbacks. Revising ones work notes and changing it according to different academic requirements is also important. Paper writing should be more applicable it requires more reading, reflecting, and reacting. Every scholar has its own style of writing (Cargill & Burgess, 2008). Academic writing follows a logical and straightforward structure in a very simple way. In a paper introduction provides the reader background knowledge, outline, scope and right direction for the study. The body paragraph explains supporting points. Conclusion refers to the thesis and gives summary of important points. Conclusion highlights research findings. In academic writing sentences are connected to clear an argument. A course on academic writing can be designed following what has already been published.

Lack of clarity

A paper may be rejected because of problems with its presentation. Such problems may include the lack of clarity in scientific work. Clarity in writing is established when the reader is aware of the researcher's aim and statement (Wajnryb, 1990). Sometime authors will puzzle the reader by injecting view into the article. A researcher must well optimize his/her instruments before the study and all these optimizations and controls used must be clearly listed in the methodology (Ajao, 2005). Sometime an editor finds it difficult to differentiate introduction and discussion. Introduction introduces the subject and explains objectives of the study (Plonsky & Mills, 2006). Discussion should be limited and in the same way uncertain statement encourages rejection by the reviewer. Conclusion should be what is concluded from the study. A review article should not be attached with various statements from authors without discussion. Conclusion shows advantages and disadvantages of the study and results of the previous work done by researchers. If the writer is not innovative he is not qualified to write a review article on the subject. Recommendations should be relevant to the study (Pierson, 2004).

THE STUDY

The study is conducted with qualitative content analysis. It is a research method that processes the qualitative data collected in research and subsequently this data are analyzed methodically and dependably so that generalization can be derived from them in the light of the priorities set by the researcher. The feedback of five rejected research papers issued by high profile journal editors is obtained from research scholars and the content of the feedback of those five rejected research is analyzed through qualitative content analysis. In second phase of data collection, five different editors or heads/members of technical or scientific committee of renowned journals have been interviewed in order to record general causes of rejections of research papers. The instrument used for these interviews is structured interview with 15 questions asked to researchers of different kinds (chosen conveniently).

Objectives of the study

- 3.1.1. to find out the common elements on the basis on which research articles are rejected and not published by top journals,
- 3.1.2. to explore challenges faced by non-native writers in publishing papers in reputed English language journals,
- 3.1.3. to assess the role of academic writing skills in acceptance of research articles for publication,
- 3.1.4. to suggest some remedial measures that can be adapted and prove helpful for EFL research scholars to increase the ratio of publication possibility of their research articles.

Research questions

- 3.2.1. What are the common elements on the basis on which research articles are rejected and not published by top journals??
- 3.2.2. What are the challenges faced by non-native writers in publishing papers in reputed English language journals??
- 3.2.3. Does academic writing skills play important role in acceptance of research articles for publication?
- 3.2.4. What remedial measures can be adapted to avoid manuscript rejection?

Participants

6 researchers were intensively interviewed for data collection. Though the number of researchers is not many, they represented groups like: those still doing PhDs and they have to publish papers in high profile journals in order to defend their theses and the academic staff (asst. and associate professors) who are looking for promotions in their career.

The tool

As mentioned, primary data collection tool is interview. In addition, data through related literature/studies review plays additional role in analysis.

Data collection

Table-1 Data gathered through interviews were classified into sub themes as under.

Theme: Non- native writers' challenges of publishing in reputed journals	
Sub-theme-1	Importance of quality publication
Sub-theme-2	Reasons of manuscript rejection
Sub-theme-3	Main reason of rejection
Sub-theme-4	Non-nativeness : a reason
Sub-theme-5	Effect of rejection on the writers
Sub-theme-6	Strategies to cope with rejection

Responses of questions by the researchers/authors were based on their own experiences. It should be mentioned here that the interviewees were research scholars, asst and associate professors.

Analysis

Thematic analysis has been the main analytical approach in this study/paper. In other words, theme wise analysis has been carried out as per the sub-themes categories shown in table-1 as above.

Importance of quality publication

Interview responses confirm that quality publications mean a lot to the researchers of all kinds. For research scholars, it is an important criterion to defend their PhD while for researchers (academic staff) quality publication is a mark of excellence which usually boost them in getting contract renewed, having increments or getting academic promotions.

Reasons of manuscript rejection

Many reasons of manuscript reasons could be possible. Hence, the most familiar reason (may be genuine or not) is that the manuscript is beyond the scope of the journal(s). This is rejection at the first stage, decision taken by the handling/chief editor. The manuscript has not been reviewed by peer reviewers. It has also been noticed that different criteria can be attributed to rejection of a manuscript, however sometimes there is no justifiable justification from the editorial board. Among the most popular reasons of rejections are: methods, concepts, conclusions/contributions. Implications, language and non-nativeness (undeclared reason). It is assumed that non-native writers/researchers can't author quality papers, however, in rejection messages/emails, such issues are not disclosed.

Main reason of rejection

Main reason(s) cannot be stated as there could be in one case, and the other in other cases. However, the paper should look good as a whole, and it must contribute to the field it has been written in. Sometimes, plagiarism suspect become a main reason, which has an indirect connection with non-nativeness thinking that the second language authors may not use standard English and as a matter of linguistic barrier, there is a fair chance of plagiarism.

Non-native factor: a reason

Though it is a hidden cause, it appears genuine. Only a very few ESL authors are able to publish in highly indexed journals such as Web of science/SCCI or Scopus indexed reputed journals. If at all, one succeeds in getting articles/papers published, the journal(s) might be located in the authors' country. The fact is that every second journals in Clarivate database (English language related journals) is either located in the US or UK. Canada, Australia are lacking far behind, therefore it seems extremely hard to get through the process of publishing in quality English language journal(s).

Effect of rejection on the writers

There are many who are negatively affected by repeated rejection, however, there are a few who are benefitted by such rejections. Rather they improvise their papers and try in better journals with more confidence.

Strategies to cope with rejection

Keeping the reasons of manuscript rejection, there is a need that writers should take care of technical things more than the content. It has been noted that presentation skills are more important than the content in the papers. It is the same case like cooking tasty food and not presenting nicely which attracts more customers in a quality restaurant than an ordinary one which issue even much less bills. In other words, graphs, tables and other technicalities should also be strategically managed.

RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Results

It has been found that there are numerous reasons of manuscript rejection. Among many other reasons, academic writing skills can be one in addition to the non-native factor. These are interrelated as it is generally believed by the original owners of English (native speakers) that writing good and standard English may not be easy for ESL/EFL writers.

The findings and results show that manuscript rejection is not an outcome of an issue. It may be the result of many flaws at the same time. One of the reasons of manuscript rejection in the English language field is inadequate writing skills (criterion varies) while for others factors include affiliation, country and non-nativeness. Interestingly ESL writers are on the panel of peer reviewers in many highly indexed journals, and they may accept or reject manuscript submitted by even native writers, but these ESL peer reviewer face a huge difficulty in publishing their own papers in the same journals. The results are somewhat in line with the study carried out by Flower dew (2001) related to attitudes of journal editors to nonnative speaker contributions. (pp121–150). Hence it is important to mention that this study was conducted 18 years ago which is a long duration in which perceptions of editors towards non-native English authors might change.

CONCLUSIONS

It was concluded that non-native writers face numerous issue during publication process especially in the field of English language. Main factors of manuscript rejection are: poor academic communication in English, lack of novelty and contribution, non-native factor and editors' preference of a manuscript by a native writer. However, non-native factor is not usually mentioned, a recommendation is made of editing, though. The findings are quite in line with Powel (2012) who referred to the challenges faced by ESL writers. Hartono et al (2019) also confirms the same results by exploring the lecturers' language problems in writing English papers for international publications in Indonesian context.

Limitation of study

The study takes samples from Asia in general and specifically from South East Asia, Gulf and Middle East regions. The journals of these areas are included in the study and the research scholars who faced rejection and whose papers have been declined from publication have been included in this research. The study covers samples from EFL research domain excluding other social sciences or humanities disciplines.

Implications

The findings are expected to contribute in many ways: the researchers will be benefitted by the outcomes and accordingly deal with the expected issues. In addition, editors/publishers will take care of issues raised through this study.

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Appendices

Appendix-A

Interview

(with researchers/writers whose manuscripts were rejected)

Researcher's Name: -----

Qualification: -----

Research Topic: -----

Area/Domain/subject: -----

Main Reason for Rejection (as commented by the journal(s): -----

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Q. 1 Why do you think research publication is extremely important?

Q.2 Did you submit your manuscript to a high profile language journal, and why?

Q. 3 Did you revise your manuscript to submit to the same journal which rejected your manuscript?

Q. 4 Did you compromise and got your manuscript published in low ranked journals?

Q. 5 What was the main reason/issue stated in the rejection mail/ letter?

Q. 6 Do you think the rejection reasons were genuine and justified?

Q. 7 Did the rejection letter degrade or boost up your morale, and how?

Q. 8 What plans have you made to overcome your shortcomings as regards to research writing to meet the criteria of publishing your paper in the journals?

Q. 9 What is your opinion about observing strict policy of quality and standard maintenance by journals as regards to publication criteria?

Q. 10 What barriers do you feel researchers face on the way of writing a research paper acceptable to high profile journals?

Q. 11 Did you get your paper edited by some senior professor before submitting to the journal?

Q. 12 Did you take professional help in writing /editing from online paid services?

Q. 13 Did you utilize editing service of some popular journals prior to submission. If not, why?

Q. 14 Do you think academic writing issue is the main reason of rejection of manuscript prepared for high profile English language journals?

Q. 15 Do you feel the issue native and non native authors adversely affect the acceptance possibilities?