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Navigating English Language Publishing: Challenges Faced by Omani Arabic-Speaking Early Career Researchers



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Abstract

While English is now the most commonly used language for internationally recognized academic publications, its consequences for non-native English-speaking researchers have yet to be sufficiently documented in the Arabian Gulf. Using Flowerdew's (2023) framework of 'globalization of scholarship' within ERPP (English for Research Publication Purposes), this paper explores the challenges and subsequent strategies used by Omani Arabic-speaking early-career scholars publishing in English language journals. This study is based on the analysis of qualitative data obtained from personal, unstructured interviews with eight Omani researchers in a publicly funded university in Oman to investigate the ways in which Arabic-speaking novice researchers negotiate the pressure to publish in well ranked English language publications by both conforming to established protocol, as well as by asserting their unique linguistic and discourse identity. The findings suggest that early-career scholars value English language publishing as a marker of institutional and professional achievement, but they want better support systems in terms of training and mentoring. Their recommendations to advance academic belonging consist of being involved with international organizations in specific disciplines to become familiar with academic discourse in English, engaging in collaborative writing, and using a journal's in-house languages services. This study calls for inclusive publication opportunities as well as increased pedagogical support for scholars seeking to belong to the English language academic community.

Keywords: ERPP, English for Research Publication Purposes; Oman; publishing; discourse community; research writing

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Introduction

As English has rapidly become the most important language for internationally recognized publication platforms, its effect on non-native English (NNS) speaking researchers has yet to be sufficiently documented in the Arabian Gulf. Using the framework of English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP), this study explores the challenges and subsequent strategies adopted by Omani-Arabic speaking early-career scholars publishing in journals published in English. Journal articles submitted for publication by non-native English speakers to western journals are often seen to have linguistic issues like unclear syntax, simple vocabulary and first language interference (Cheng et al., 2021; Lin, 2023). Based on personal interviews with a diverse group of 8 early career researchers in a publicly funded university, this study investigates the way in which Omani Arabic speaking researchers negotiate the academic pressure to publish in indexed English language publications. This paper uses Flowerdew and Wang's (2016) call for inclusive publication opportunities, applied here in the context of Oman, to explore the role of gatekeeping practices in international academic publishing, as well as investigate Omani researchers' experiences and concerns in the English language publishing context.

Increasingly, ERPP is becoming an important concern in academia worldwide. On the one hand, second language theorists like Canagarajah (2002, p. 237) say that "[d]ue to the one-sided nature of publishing, we are forced into a position of understanding ourselves through center eyes," while others like Hyland (2016, p. 58) argue that "framing publication problems as a crude Native vs non-the Native polarization not only draws on an outmoded respect for 'Native speaker' competence but serves to demoralize EAL [English as an additional language] writers and marginalize the difficulties experienced by novice L1 English academics". As always, the reality is somewhere in-between. In either case, the struggles of multilingual scholars publishing in English for personal and professional reasons remain central to academic debates in universities worldwide (Erdocia & Soler, 2024; Langum & Sullivan, 2020). Not only does the emphasis on English language publication impact researchers in the peripheries who have to master the rules of academic English even to share locally sourced data, it also has implications on the way that indigenous knowledge is produced and disseminated in a globally accepted language. While many studies have focused on the challenges faced by scholars in different regions of Kachru's (1992) expanding circle of English, others have focused on the ideological and pedagogical repercussions of western dominated publishing (Abusalim, 2023; Curry & Lillis, 2013; Flowerdew & Habibie, 2021). This study focuses specifically on the Arab-Omani scholar to unpack the issues, challenges and strategies adopted by them as they join an international community of researchers publishing in English.

The dominance of English language journals in academic research and publishing in all fields has been well documented (Altbach, 2008; O'Neil, 2018). In a study conducted between 2007 and 2018 by Tian and Huber (2021), it was found that 50% of all research on management and leadership originated from English-speaking countries, with the rest of the world sharing the other half. In fact, they state that only 7% of all English-language publications on management between 2007 and 2018 came from the Middle East, with only one from the Arabian Gulf (The United Arab Emirates). According to some studies, 75% of all publications in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) are in English, although only 7.5% of the world population consists of native English speakers (Bahji et al., 2023). According to Meester (2013), apart from English-language publications, 25% of all journals in the Humanities originated in western Europe and were written primarily in French or German. This introduces the question of choice of language, publication opportunity and motivations for publication in English for academics in the Arabian Gulf.

In the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), Arabic is the official language, although there is a demographically diverse population (De Bel-Air, 2015; Rajan, 2018). It is the language of governmental

communication, royal decrees, official ministerial announcements as well as the medium of instruction in public schools in most countries (Al Issa, 2020; Troudi & Jendli, 2011). Even in institutions of higher education, Arabic is the medium of instruction in publicly funded universities, especially in the Humanities, Law and Education (teacher training). Faculty members and researchers pursuing Masters and PhD programs thus engage in research in Arabic, particularly in history, archeology, geography and Media Studies where the primary sources are available in Arabic. This has significant implications for the success of dissemination, as much of the research through publication remains in Arabic, resulting in low citations in international English language journals (Johnson, 2018). In spite of the number of attempts at indexing publications in Arabic along established criteria set by recognized indices such as the Arabic Citation Index (ARCI) (Abdel-Aty, 2012; El-Ouahi, 2023), the issue of acceptance, dissemination and visibility of Arabic-language journals still remains contentious. The pressure to publish in English thus becomes the default for scholars in the Arabian Gulf for whom citations and impact factor are important markers of professional and institutional recognition, as well as personal growth. In fact, Hanafi (2011) suggests that knowledge production has moved away from local contexts on account of the pressure to publish in global platforms for promotion and other institutional requirements like rankings and accreditation, in what he aptly calls the phenomena of ‘[p]ublish globally and perish locally or publish locally and perish globally’ (p. 291). This has major implications on the way that publications are viewed within the context of the GCC countries.

The Arabian Gulf, consisting of 6 countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates, Qatar) is considered a mid-income region according to data from the World Bank (The World Bank, 2024) and it has seen some of the fastest developments across areas of human indicators like health and education. The investment in research and development has risen exponentially in the new millennium. The vision statements of GCC countries focus on development of human knowledge and research and innovation are promoted (Hemmy & Mehta, 2021). Yet, as Abouchedid and Abdelnour (2015, p. 673) show, productivity in terms of research papers within the Middle East is ‘quite low’ when compared to other regions. While independently collected data showed this, it was also evidenced by the paucity of information provided by the institutions when asked for it by the authors of the current paper, further asserting the haphazard way in which research was being documented, archived and regulated. Studies on universities in this region repeatedly suggest that there is a paucity of data which is locally produced, and which refers to local communities of knowledge: “Institutions of higher education in the Arabian Gulf face some serious challenges and need to embed in their missions and visions the creation and production of indigenous knowledge” (Costandi et al., 2019, p. 72). The limited contribution to international literature in social sciences by scholars in the Middle East has been documented in several research reviews (El-Zeki, 2008; Hallinger & Hammad, 2017). For example, a review of educational research papers published in selected international journals between 1995 and 2006 found that only 36 articles were related to the Arab region, representing only 1.7% of the total number of papers (2112) published in those journals (Hammad & Al-Ani, 2021). This suggests that indigenous research in the Arab world is in its nascent stages, not least because much of the work is being done in Arabic and lacks sustained dissemination. Whether the problem lies in the language of the research and publication, or the nature of the publication system itself is difficult to ascertain. Publishing in Arabic has comparatively limited opportunities for dissemination due to limited translations. This lowers the visibility of academics, impacting their chances of academic promotion and international recognition. In a study on the state of academic promotions among regional scholars in the Middle East, Hanafi (2011, p. 303) concludes that “[i]n short, the promotion system effectively internalizes the hegemony of northern social sciences, thereby deepening the divide among Arab social scientists”.

The pressure to publish in highly ranked English language journals is an important and accepted part of academia (Kwiek, 2021; Niles et al., 2020). It is directly linked to appointments, promotions, tenure and enhanced faculty profile which, in turn, is linked to the universities’ global rankings by international

agencies. This leads to the ‘publish or perish’ mentality where university faculty members gain professional recognition mainly based on their academic publications. The choice of publication platforms further determines the reputation of the scholar to either be limited to a local context (if they are publishing in a regional language) or be recognized at a global level (if publishing in an English language journal). There is, therefore, incessant pressure to publish in prestigious journals. Most appointments in higher education are based on a regulated system of publication criteria, including quartile ranking parameters in the widely accepted bibliographic databases, Scopus and Web of Science, which also quantify a researcher’s citations over a given time period.

Studies have shown that English language articles appearing in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) had the maximum number of citations (Martín-Martín et al., 2018; Yang & Meho, 2006). A 2019 study by Vera-Baceta et al. concludes that “English dominates both WoS and Scopus. 92.64% of the documents indexed in Scopus are in English and this percentage is even higher in the WoS with 95.37% compared to the second language with the highest number of documents in Scopus, Chinese, with 2.76% and the second language in WoS, Spanish, with 1.26%” (p. 1). Citation metrics, including h-index referring to an author-level metric measuring both the productivity and citation impact of the publications, and i-10 index used by Google Scholar to identify the number of publications by an author with at least 10 citations, are further used to measure reach and dissemination. Improving the impact factor to prove authority and prestige is thus an imperative for young scholars striving to climb the academic ladder. Scholars are thus compelled to publish in English language journals, making the use of English “a dependency by choice” (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014, p. 724).

This paper will first investigate the existing literature that explores the status, challenges and recommendations made around the subject of ERPP around the world, and then, within the Arabian Gulf, with a focus on Oman. It will look at studies conducted over the last decade exploring the issue of publishing in English, changes in institutional support, if any, and the ways in which academics negotiate the requirements of academic discourse while finding an individual voice. This review contextualizes the role of English among NNS within the academic community in the Arabian Gulf, perhaps pointing to this as a factor for low output in terms of publications and citations, and in turn, university rankings.

Literature Review

The centrality of English to research in all disciplines is an accepted reality. As Curry and Lillis (2013, p. xv) explain: “English is seen as a stable, monolithic resource and as such English-medium text is often evaluated for how closely the language used approximates the ‘standard’ English valued by many high-status journal gatekeepers”. Research into ERPP can be traced back to the seminal work of Canarajah (2002) on the resource and discourse challenges faced by academics in Sri Lanka seeking to write and publish in English language journals. Discussing ‘inequalities in publishing’ (p. 12), Canagarajah focuses on the notion that the researcher at the peripheries of the western academic circles is faced with the choice of either appropriating the discourse of English language research or risk their work not having visibility.

The dynamics of ERPP have been explored from multiple perspectives: the language of multilingual and bilingual scholars (Swales, 2019; Zhang & Liu, 2023), gatekeeping practices in western publications (Abusalim, 2023; Habibie, 2022) and the strategies leveraged by non-native English language scholars to fit into established systems of western publications (Cadman, 2017; Li et al., 2018). Flowerdew and Habibie (2021) brought many diverse elements within the ambit of ERPP and defined it as “an academic field concerned with the investigation of the nature and use of English in research and publication contexts” (p. 2). Most of the focus of ERPP is on the genre adapted or on the geographical contexts of the scholars for whom academic identity is tied to belonging to English-speaking scholarly circles.

Interestingly, even the categories under which ERPP is bracketed can be contentious and uncertain. While the use of English in academic publications is seen as an area of enquiry within EAL (Buckingham, 2014), Flowerdew and Habibie (2022) state that ERPP is an important category of EAP (English for Academic Purposes). It is also seen as a sub-genre of Second Language Writing (Habibie, 2022). The scholars working in these areas themselves are multilingual researchers or use a LOTE (Language other than English) (Liu & Buckingham, 2022). Associated areas of World Englishes and Lingua Franca are also referenced (Flowerdew & Wang, 2016), indicating the large scope of ERPP research.

Expectations of English language proficiency among journal publishers are also generic and unspecified. McKinley and Rose (2018) studied the requirements of 210 international journals and found that the editors expected an unclear notion of ‘correct language’ which is always code for native proficiency in writing. They call on editors to “relax some author guidelines to encourage all authors to write using an English that can easily be understood by a broad, heterogeneous, global, and multilingual audience” (p. 1). Within the process of writing in English, the common challenges faced by NNS scholars are “the full range of lexico-grammatical, socio-pragmatic and discursal dimensions” (Cargill & Burgess, 2017, p. 1). Scholars are often told to use appropriate discourse markers suited to international academic English, respond to generic comments by reviewers to ‘improve language’, adhere to the format and structure of specific journal styles and understand the implicit comments of reviewers. In short, the overriding challenge is that of following the established template and process of English language publication. In addition, as Ingvarsdóttir and Arnbjörnsdóttir (2018) suggest in their study on researchers in Iceland, the issues faced by NNS scholars go far beyond those of funding and time management which are common to all researchers to include adapting a discourse which is different from that to which they are accustomed, having to identify a particular audience for their research and other issues like having to find a voice and express themselves as an authority on the subject.

ERPP in the Arab world

ERPP is an emerging pedagogical area as academics from across the world participate in globalized knowledge primarily transmitted through English language journals. Data from the peripheries in the global South, however, show that scholars find it more difficult to be accepted, read and cited because of various reasons including relevance, interest, awareness and applicability (Collyer, 2018). In the Arab world, studies in Tunisia and Egypt focus on the challenges of publishing in regional Arabic journals. Hanafi and Arvanitis (2014), for example, have shown how globalization has made publication in Arabic more challenging as it offers fewer chances of dissemination and recognition. They maintain that “...many factors including the political economy of publication, globalization and commodification of higher education have marginalized the peripheral languages like Arabic.” (p. 724). Studies focusing on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar reach similar conclusions, with Abusalim (2021, p. 43) arguing that Arab universities often lack a research culture and that scholars speak of lack of training in publishing. Her study shows that Arabic-language publications in STEM are more likely to be accepted and even rewarded than those in Social Sciences. In fact, studies on Arabic language journals show that research in social sciences depends far more on western sources and it is challenging to form independent theories or situate research entirely within a local context, decoupled from existing, western published research (Hanafi & Arvanitis, 2014). As such, it is difficult to produce indigenous, new knowledge which emerges from within the community in ways that display differing results from those previously established in English language sources. In fact, Abusalim (2023) suggests that the challenges faced by Arab scholars are not only availability of resources, but also knowledge construction which remains colonial as researchers still depend on data found in British and French sources.

The context of Oman

Within higher education contexts in the Arabian Gulf, universities are increasingly vying for visibility and international rankings through publications and citations. This is also true for Oman. Sultan Qaboos University is the oldest and only publicly funded university in Oman, ranked at 362 in the Global rankings and 8th among Arab universities in 2024, according to the Times World University Rankings (2024). Although the university has improved its rankings over the years as a result of persistent focus on publishing by university authorities, a sustained study on the challenges faced by scholars themselves has not yet been undertaken. A 2014 study by Louisa Buckingham studied 30 scholars in Oman to examine the ways in they formed a “discourse community” (p. 6) of English language scholars while working from the peripheries. The strategies were largely self-taught and consisted of reading articles from prospective journals, drafting multiple times, language- checking from colleagues and mentors (rather than professional services) and self-referencing. Hammad and Al-Ani (2021, p. 1), in a study based on focus group interviews found that researchers faced “some challenges that hampered educational research, including time constraints, the lack of a collaborative research culture, the lack of research training, and the absence of a clear research agenda”. A more focused study by Getahun et al. (2021) investigated scholars in Oman and Ethiopia and their choice of language and publication platforms and how it related to the scholars’ professional identity. While these studies focused on the challenges that faced faculty members in engaging in research, they did not explore the processes whereby scholars negotiated the language of production with their native language, the strategies they leveraged in their journey from drafting to final submission of an English language article, or their self-perception of belonging to an international academic community. This study addresses these aspects.

Methodology

Conducted at Oman’s Sultan Qaboos University, this study has used semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research method to gain understanding of how Omani researchers subjectively interpret the process of publishing in English language journals and how they attribute meaning to their social experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Interviews have been seen to be important and interesting tools for discussion and “a pathway to stimulating reflexivity” (Langley & Meziani, 2020, p. 384). As Magaldi and Berler (2020) explain, semi-structured interviews may be based on a previously established and agreed-upon protocol, but to the extent that they are “focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds” (p. 4825).

The target population was Omani faculty members. Only Omanis were chosen for this study for a number of reasons: having been educated in an Arabic context, they would all be NNS of English and would have learnt English through their years in school and university. Another reason was that publication for Omani scholars in the public university is primarily a matter of choice, as it is not related to the longevity of their careers. Omanis are tenured faculty members, unlike expatriates who work on 3-year contracts whose renewals are primarily based on publication history. As part of ongoing nationalization policies followed by all GCC countries, Oman also offers specific routes towards recruitment of Omanis in all sectors, including higher education. Typically, Omani candidates are recruited at the end of their undergraduate program, based on selected criteria which includes Grade Point Average and interviews. Once selected, they are then integrated into a department and made to undertake observations of classroom and administrative units before applying for their Masters and, later on, PhD degrees, almost always in English speaking universities in the United States or the United Kingdom.

This means that, although having experienced Arabic medium instruction in school, Omani scholars often have more than a decade of experience in using academic English. This is true for those in the Sciences, where English is the medium of instruction in the university, but in Humanities disciplines like history, geography or archeology, training is in Arabic, although they may have doctoral degrees from English speaking universities.

Omani scholars at Sultan Qaboos University are thus part of the academic community very early on. The pressure to publish for tenure or for even short term, ad-hoc and contract and temporary academic jobs (Rani, 2015; Goldan et al., 2023) is absent in this context. Largely, Omani scholars who publish do so for purposes of self-development, in addition to academic promotion which is one tangible outcome of publication. There is some encouragement to publish in recognized and prestigious journals which is in keeping with the university's focus on accreditation and global rankings (Getahun et al., 2021), with monetary rewards given for publication in indexed journals. This is qualitatively different to other research which suggests that the most important reasons that academics engage in scholarly work is "academic hiring, contract renewal, tenure and promotion purposes" (Flowerdew, 2015, p. 260). Therefore, the purposes for academic engagement through publication as well as related professional activities like networking, reviewing and research in funded projects would be relevant to investigate among Omani faculty members.

For the purposes of this study, Omani faculty members of various disciplines were approached. Convenience sampling strategies were used to choose individuals who were willing to participate, met the inclusion criteria, and were accessible for interview (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). The cases are drawn from the 8 interviewees who were representative of the target population. 2 study participants were lecturers in History (publishing in Arabic and English), 2 were lecturers in Information Technology (publishing in English), 2 were Lecturers of English who were teaching undergraduates in the foundation program offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies of the university, 1 was an Assistant Professor in the College of Science (publishing in English) and 1 was an Assistant Professor in the College of Arts and Social Science (Tourism Department, publishing in English and Arabic). The Lecturers had 1-3 years of teaching and research experience after their PhD, and the Assistant Professor had 4-6 years of publishing experience post-PhD. With a teaching experience of 2-4 years and research experience of 6-8 years (including research during their PhD), the interviewees were considered early career professionals.

All 8 participants participated in a free-flowing face-to-face individual conversation which was audio recorded and later transcribed. The broad questions were shared ahead of the scheduled interviews. The interviews were piloted with one part-time instructor who could not participate in the later proceedings. Some interview questions were modified following the pilot as they were unclear or not understood by the respondent. The interviews were conducted in English as the subject was English language publications, and this also gave an opportunity to the respondents to use the research terminology with which they were familiar. Use of English as the language of the interview also provided direct evidence (in the form of recorded quotations quoted here) of the respondents' proficiency in English. Both researchers were female.

The interviews were aimed to primarily encourage the participants' reflection on their research, writing and publication processes: the purpose behind doing research, their choice of language, strategies and challenges faced when writing a research paper, the criteria behind the choice of publication platform as well as the institutional or individual support they received in the publication process. Thematic (content) analysis was used as an approach. As suggested by Gioia et al., (2013), first-order codes were assigned to the qualitative data, and then these codes were structured into

higher order themes. In conducting data analysis, no computer-aided qualitative data analysis software was used.

The obtained qualitative data focused on Omani researchers' personal experiences of writing and publishing, recognizing that each experience could be different, based on factors such as their discipline, their academic support systems, as well as their personal professional involvement in academic organizations. As Flowerdew (1999) puts it: 'The aim is to allow the second language writers to voice their perceptions of the situation they find themselves in, to recreate, in effect, their own reality as they perceive it' (p. 250).

Results and Discussion

Reasons for publishing in English

English was chosen as the first language of publication by all the participants, including those in the Humanities, for a number of reasons. When asked for their reasons for publishing in English language journals when they had the opportunity to publish in both Arabic and English, respondents largely spoke about the prestige factor:

Publishing in Arabic journals gives us very little recognition. Most of the journals are based in Cairo or Lebanon – they are not even in this region, so there is no point publishing in them because nobody will read them.

I have to publish in English because the journals are ranked there. Even if it is not Scopus, at least it is peer reviewed. I can think of Scopus journals later, but first, I must start with other peer reviewed journals.

The university does not recognize publications in Arabic-language journals for promotion. I am planning to apply one day and those journals will not help me.

There are more publication opportunities in English. Most of my work is in this language also.

It is clear from the interviews that, among Omani scholars, the preferred language of publication is English, even if it means climbing up the publishing ladder by starting small and aiming high. Visibility, academic respectability, reputation, as well as difficulties in translation are the oft-cited reasons to publish in English.

While some of the respondents work as English language teachers or in EMI programs (in Mathematics and IT), even the respondents from Humanities disciplines (history and tourism) preferred English language publications. This is because, for most of them, English was the main language of the sources they consulted and the only language which would offer them recognition in a point-based promotion system (where promotions are based on the rank and quartile of journals in which the candidate has published). This is further compounded by the fact that English language journals have more visibility and are recognized internationally, so their own professional reputations would be enhanced through citations. Being part of a regional and international academic community was important to all respondents, although it was not necessarily voiced in this way, especially by younger academics who thought of it as a requirement rather than a preference.

Process of drafting and submitting a paper

Academics in Oman typically reported the process of drafting a paper as first arriving at research questions, often thought out in Arabic, even creating a plan or an outline in Arabic before writing an English draft:

I did the experiment and collected result which support my claims/hypothesis, then I draft my report. I think in Arabic, so I make an outline in Arabic before writing the draft in English. Then the draft is reviewed with the co-author in two or more iterations. These reviews include language enhancement. Then we submit the final version for review process.

I go through the normal process that is set by the publisher, but before submission I review my work with my colleagues for proofreading. Then, I do the editing after the publishers send their comments.

A scholar in the Humanities said, “It is difficult to formulate the right point that I am trying to make as I think in Arabic first. But when I do more readings, the terms and language become more clear”.

The process of preparing a manuscript is described thus:

I worked on reporting a quantitative study on what knowledge and attitude EFL learners have about EFL academic essays. I submitted my article, and then a summary of three reviews were shared with me (some of these reviews were contradictory when it came to methodology and how the research question should be approached qualitatively or quantitatively). There were also comments on the article document itself. I responded to reviews as much as I could. I was advised prior to the publication process to do proof reading as my paper would benefit from some proofreading. I asked a native teacher (a schoolteacher) to do the proofreading. The comments I finally received from her were mostly on restructuring some of my sentences and modifying some lexical expressions.

ERPP scholars across the world follow similar drafting practices of writing around the central data presented. For example, McDowell and Liardet (2019) in their study of Japanese junior and senior academics, found that they “reported a data-centric approach starting with data descriptions” (p. 416).

Challenges in adaptation to indexed journal specifications

When asked about the challenges they faced when writing for an English language journal, the answers were mixed. Initially, all, except 1 respondent, said that they did not face any major challenges, suggesting that they had been trained in submitting manuscripts in English during their study for their PhD. Ease with English was clearly a challenge for some scholars, particularly those in the Humanities, where the medium of instruction is Arabic in the university, much of the time is spent translating terms and information into Arabic for the students. Shifting from that to writing in academic English is a challenge they find difficult to surmount. Typically, each respondent had published 2-3 journal articles so far and were used to writing, revising and re-drafting in English. On further prodding about the challenges they faced in terms of rhetorical language, common expressions, registers peculiar to academic language or in their specific discipline, the answers varied. Upon reflection, respondents articulated numerous challenges they faced when beginning to structure their articles. These included ways of organizing data, understanding specific English language concepts, using expressions and concepts

that were foreign to Arabic. Even writing shorter paragraphs and using the passive voice were rhetorical practices with which they struggled. For some researchers, this was a situation to which they were accustomed: “Since English is not the mother tongue of most the Omani people, most people do not read a lot of documents in it so that will affect their writing”. Others, however, offered other reasons for the challenge in writing in English, not only in linguistically but in terms of accepted discourse:

The problem is using [d]eep metaphoric expression, lack of rhetorical expression in English.”

In fact, how to tell the story, use shiny expression and fancy mathematical notation (in my discipline) is about 40% of publishing process.

Arabic style is different; there are significant rhetorical variations between English and Arabic. However, when I start thinking in English, my mind immediately switches to its English version.

Using examples from cultural context to illustrate ideas is very challenging in English.

The challenges articulated above, in terms of the organization and use of ‘native like’ fluency of language is in-keeping with Flowerdew and Wang’s (2016) investigation of Chinese scholars’ submissions and their editorial suggestions which include revisions in “substitution, correction, addition, deletion, and rearrangement, and four different lexical-grammatical levels, i.e., morpheme, word, group and clause/clause complex” (p. 39).

Cultural factors that impact rhetorical choices

Beyond dealing with linguistic features within an EFL context, the interviewees also spoke at length about the challenges of participating in a global academic community. Although not always articulated as such, the challenge for them was to make their presence felt in the world of academia, having the confidence to share findings which are significant enough to publish. This was true in both the Humanities and the Sciences. Some common issues that came up were using the format of articulating research questions, giving the findings followed by analysis and discussion and conclusions. They found this system too narrow and rigid for their purposes. They also found it difficult to make assertive conclusions which they did not find themselves qualified to do. This was particularly true when it came to the ‘Findings’ or analysis section of the article. Interviewees typically commented on the difficulty of making their own opinion clear:

I didn’t know that I had to have an opinion from the beginning – the theory was missing.

I only use other authors because I don’t think that my opinion matters so much.

I feel the data I have gathered compares to that of others, so why will I focus on it more?

I still don’t know how to make my opinion matter – I feel I am not experienced enough.

There was also lack of confidence in linking theoretical work with the findings, mainly because the younger academics did not have enough experience in writing and publishing.

Most importantly, the researcher in Tourism said, “I find that international journals don’t want data from Oman. They want my article to compare to another place or just give a case study which is from

another country”. Regarding using local examples as evidence, one interviewee said, “I avoid using Omani examples in education because the international journal editors will not appreciate it” and then “I don’t think that any example for [sic] Oman is relevant – I will not use it”.

Strategies to adapt research methods and writing to journal specifications

Respondents were all aware that they had to adopt various strategies to be able to write an article which could be potentially published in a good journal. Most said that they read a few of the articles carefully from a linguistic and organizational point of view to understand the end-product and imitate it. This gave them an idea of the expectations of a journal to which they could submit a manuscript.

To some extent I practice language re-use, seeing how published articles are using some terms.

I use published texts as models during the writing process.

As perceived by one of the study participants, there is awareness “of the relevance of the strategy of language re-use to support the drafting of particular sections of an article,” but she didn’t think she used it that often. She believed that she was perhaps “not good at allocating time and exerting effort to work on upgrading my linguistic level to improve register or to better articulate thoughts and ideas”.

When asked about which of these strategies are used during the writing process in English, one of the respondents answered that it was a combination of “looking at published articles as models” and “borrowing the main structure as a framework”. Sometimes I borrow phrases if they are relevant, but not often,” said another respondent.

All the respondents said that they shared the manuscript with colleagues in their department to correct ‘the language’. This could sometimes be a euphemism, as anecdotal evidence suggests that other colleagues, often native English language speakers, may be extensively editing a linguistically weak paper, often with no credit or official acknowledgment.

Professional proof-reading, feedback and reviews concerned the researchers to varying degrees:

Yes, it is normal to receive a comment from reviewers such as ‘manuscript should be checked with a native English / manuscript need language check’ ... etc.

I would check certain structures/phrases (for appropriate use etc.) through asking more experienced English teachers, paying for proofreading services of certain sections of the paper or responding to editing suggestions/feedback provided by journals.

Mostly I get brief comments like ‘check language’ before getting a rejection for an article.

Yes, sometimes I try to use some spelling and grammar checking and for official comprehensive documents I use professional proofreading service.

Another concern is in the coping strategies used by scholars. As one respondent said, “I write a paper once every 3-4 months. I respond to feedback but try to send the article to another journal for faster publication.” This trend has been seen as problematic by Flowerdew and Wang (2016) as researchers

could simultaneously send their manuscript to different journals and get feedback from them. They could then work on that feedback and send it to journals with a higher impact for final publication. While this is considered unethical, only one of the academics interviewed here suggested they did this.

Perceptions about support systems available to early-career academics

When asked about any institutional support they may have received in the process of researching and writing, one of the participants responded: “There is a list of proofreaders (not updated) that occasionally people circulate in the workplace whenever there is a request from someone for such kind of service. However, I don’t think that there is a clear set of support/services offered by the institution where ESL users can easily approach and make use of.”

This participant mentioned that she tried to make sure she was connected to international organizations in her area of discipline. In her opinion, this can indirectly help her progress in the way she writes for publication.

In fact, as for any academic networks or formal support groups that the participants maintain online or in person, there were practically none:

I have collegial support, not institutional support, I guess it is different.

I think the academic writing training is not enough in different levels of the university courses. In addition, the proofreading services are not available easily on campus.

In the ERPP literature, support, guidance, mentorship and editing are all seen to be central. Institutional support is often asked for by academic faculty internationally and there are some commercially available books to guide non-native English researchers. This is in addition to the rapidly rising number of digital support systems in the form of videos, MOOCs (Mass Online Open courses) and websites that focus on organization, citation and use of academic English. Emerging scholars, however, are not always aware of these facilities. Most researchers of ERPP have noted the lack of personalized institutional support on the part of universities which expect their faculty to write and publish in ranked journals (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2019; Janssen & Restrepo 2019). When available, support is often minimal and fleeting, with workshops or online lectures offered sporadically across semesters, as revealed in the interviews.

Of course, there are various published guidelines (Cargill & O’Connor, 2013; Curry & Lillis, 2013) as well as editors of different capacities who offer help to organize academic articles for publication. Journal publications have their own in-house editorial service, for a price. However, this tends to be an industry where writers from less privileged corners of the world, and with less access to professional help, are duped into pricy contracts with little guarantee of publication, as advertised in the online services of journals. The pressure to make use of in-house proofreading services makes emerging scholars from the peripheries susceptible to manipulation, even compromising ethical standards as researchers are willing to accept reworded articles which fit into a journal’s specifications (Mills & Robinson, 2022).

Solutions and Recommendations in ERPP

The challenges to ERPP are here to stay as long as English language publications are prioritized in scholarly research and remain the benchmark of success. The solutions to these issues are primarily two-fold: responsibility could be placed on the researchers to learn to ‘belong’ to the mainstream academic community through the process of trial and error as experienced in the peer review process.

Alternatively, the onus on this training could be placed on institutions in whose name the publications are documented. Such support could be in the form of professional workshops, mentoring, collaborations with other universities, as well as increased networking opportunities.

One of the important strategies leveraged in the case of peripheral researchers has been collaboration (McDowell & Liardét, 2019). This is either in the form of co-authored publications, engagement in research groups, academic networking (regional or international), among others. This research found that the scholars in Oman were not engaging in much collaborative work, particularly in the fields mentioned here. A cursory look at the publications of the group interviewed here shows minimal co-authorship. When asked about this, one interviewee simply said, “I work better alone” while another elaborated a bit more: “It is difficult to work with others because of time and schedules. We teach different courses and have different specializations – it is not easy to publish with others.” The university has been encouraging collaboration at local, regional and international levels and has created opportunities to establish research groups, for instance, but faculty in ELT and the Humanities seem less interested in taking up this opportunity. There is a tendency to stay within the areas of focus of the PhD, which has a detrimental effect on professional advancement.

Most of the solutions offered by the respondents in this project suggested working on oneself to be able to ‘belong’ to the English-speaking academic community. Some of them did not relate to their peripheral experience, perhaps, as noted above, they saw themselves as the privileged who had higher education opportunities in western universities, participated in conferences, often funded by the university, and were recognized for their work by being rewarded higher positions in the college administration. But this was not the experience of the younger scholars in the Humanities whose higher education was in Oman and not in western universities. They struggled more with the process of writing in English and submitting manuscripts to journals with high indices. Although they publish at present in peer reviewed, non-indexed journals, they do aim to submit to journals which are more prestigious in their fields with the help of department colleagues or a paid language service.

Conclusion

Li and Flowerdew (2020) state that scholarship on ERPP focuses on two related areas: a focus on language and its corresponding issues, and on other related publishing factors including where to publish, how to deal with reviews and ethics in publication. In the interviews conducted for this study, the participants expressed anxiety on both accounts. The pressure to publish in English language journals was found to be challenging for researchers in the Humanities who had less practice in using English in their everyday classroom contexts. All participants, to a certain extent, felt the pressure to master academic conventions preferred in English language journals while being native Arabic speakers. However, most of them did feel better equipped to handle writing and publishing in English owing to their training in western universities where they earned their PhD. Shortage of resources in terms of journals to which the library subscribed, the absence of workshops, mentoring facilities and opportunities for collaboration were identified as the most significant challenges faced by early career scholars who felt that they were mostly left to their own resources with rewards and awards being given after the fact of publishing rather than ensuring a smoother publication process.

ERPP continues to be an important pedagogical approach because established English-Language standards remain the norm for almost all journals internationally. From grammatical issues to the use of established ways of presenting information and data, early-career scholars struggle with reviewers’ comments in journals which are based solely on the use of academic English. The result of such gatekeeping results in much knowledge, data and points of view not having an opportunity to be showcased internationally. The implications of local knowledge not being introduced,

critiqued and understood are that the global south will continue to be seen from the lens of the global north. The twin issues of language and knowledge production are not separate but part of the larger discourse on power, voice and representation. ERPP offers a useful intervention in documenting the challenges faced by NNS English scholars who have to navigate the world of English language publication in order to ensure professional recognition and advancement. While the challenges faced by Arab researchers range from lexical-grammatical constructions to expressing academic authority, the strategies of continuous engagement with academic networks, seeking professional help in writing and working on multiple drafts to find individual voice have been found to be most helpful. As scholars attempt to move to the English-dominant scholarly centre by publishing in established, indexed journals, larger questions of knowledge production and dissemination within academia remain.

Decolonizing English publication has been long called for among the academic community. Regional and alternative knowledge needs platforms for dissemination which will necessarily be English language journals. How this knowledge is shared, however, continues to engage scholars and academics in different parts of the world as they negotiate established publication practices with diverse ways of sharing data and methods. Just as Canagarajah (2002) felt he had to ‘dilute’ his experiences of doing research in Sri Lanka and publish his experiences in a western journal, other researchers in non-English speaking countries continue to share similar situations. This leads to many missed opportunities wherein crucial data, experiences and voices are sidelined as they do not fit the narratives as understood and required within English medium publications. That language should be the critical obstacle to knowledge sharing in a globalized world is problematic. The debate on academic belonging by non-native English scholars, such as the participants in this study, can only be solved with innovative strategies on the part of publication platforms which should encourage diversity in presentation and language use. Prioritizing content over form would ensure that academia across the world is being represented and their work valued, not for following a given template but for being authentic and unique.

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