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Fostering Academic Writers' Plurilingual Voices

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Abstract

In today's global society, a majority of academic writers come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, where English is an additional language. Publishing in most academic journals, however, is governed by native-English norms. As instructors and tutors guiding novice plurilingual writers through these conventions so that their papers meet publishing standards, we feel that their voices and styles get lost in the process, and fear that the academic and scientific community may be losing out when these writers' work is not accepted. To understand how plurilingual novice writers experience writing for publication, we conducted in-depth interviews, followed by a content analysis of the interviews, which revealed recurring themes relating to barriers and gains from writing in English. We present these along with exemplary quotes from the respondents. Additionally, we examine the ways in which the publication world is changing and how these changes can aid novice writers, as well as consider ways in which academic writing boundaries can become more elastic and inclusive.

Introduction

> *The challenge therefore is this: although we cannot speak outside discourses and institutions, we should not conform to them wholesale. There is always room to negotiate, modify, and reconfigure. (Canagarajah, 2004. p. 266)*

Academic writing has been guided by conventions established by native English writer norms (Strauss, 2017; Lillis & Curry, 2015; Turner, 2018), when today's many, if not most, academic writers and their readers originate from non-English-speaking countries (Akst, 2020; Hanauer & Englander, 2011). This situation leaves these non-first-English-language writers at a disadvantage, since these scholars face the double challenge of both producing rigorous academic research and writing papers that meet the English-language expectations of journal editors and reviewers (Corcoran & Englander, 2016). Of these non-native English writers, or writers of English as an additional language (EAL), a growing number are plurilingual, namely, "an individual's experience with, and use of, multiple [often more than two] languages, sometimes in combination with one another" (Thorne, 2013, p. 269). We chose to use the term plurilingual, as opposed to multilingual, as nowadays multilingualism is used to describe the presence of multiple languages in society, as opposed to the individual's multiple-language repertoire (Jørgensen et al., 2012). Our focus here is on individuals' experience of academic writing in a language that is not their dominant one.

Like all novice writers, plurilingual writers often experience pressure to meet publishing requirements and deadlines, but they may find themselves at a disadvantage when trying to publish their research in English. Languages other than English might have different elements, such as "very long sentences, complex syntax, figurative language and deliberate ambiguity, among other features. These features are often lauded as elements of good quality writing in the Romance languages (Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian) and in Arabic" (Englander,

2014, p. 58). Studies of non-native English-speaking academics have found that when non-English elements are used in English-language manuscripts, their authors are told by journal reviewers that the articles are awkward, poor, or linguistically insufficient (Hanauer & Englander, 2013). Thus, plurilingual writers may turn to professional translators, native-English speakers to help them write, or use online translating tools, frozen linguistic chunks, or phrases borrowed from articles (Cargill & Burgess, 2017; Flowerdew, 2007; and Hanauer & Englander, 2011).

However, plurilingual scholars do not face only linguistic challenges, but also diverse writing conventions that differ from one linguistic culture to the next. Specifically, Introductions, Discussions, and Abstracts may be structured in a different manner and use different linguistic or rhetorical styles than English (Englander, 2014, pp. 58-61). To overcome these stylistic mismatches (Uzuner, 2008, p. 256), the writers may turn for support to native English language teachers or writing specialists. While this "literacy brokering" (Lillis & Curry, 2006) can help novice EAL writers achieve their goals, it is likely that their identity and voice may get lost in the process (Canagarajah, 2015; Canagarajah & Matsumoto, 2017).

Another difference between English and other languages is that English is considered a writer-responsible language where it is the writer's responsibility to ensure the reader's understanding of the text. To achieve this, the writer is expected to anticipate any difficulties the reader might have in the text and address them, as well as write with a clear structure and in a concise manner (Englander, 2014, p. 60). In contrast, other languages (such as Arabic, Russian, and Spanish) are reader-responsible languages that have a much more implicit organization of texts and the reader is considered to be an intelligent being who does not need to be carefully guided and have everything explained explicitly (Englander, 2014, p. 58). This, in addition to the different cultural attitudes to hedging or boosting (Englander, 2014, pp. 29-32), stating claims, and supporting them, necessitate not only a strong control of language, but also a deep knowledge and awareness of the nuances of the scientific culture.

It would seem that plurilingual and pluricultural writers are often expected to produce writing constituting "a virtual effacement of the L1 abilities and predispositions" (Byrnes, 2002, p. 42). When journal editors and reviewers criticize manuscripts by international writers for these reasons, they consider it to be in the interest of the global academic community (Englander, 2014, pp. 60-62). But this consideration of the greater good can result in the rejection, not only of the author's language skills, but of the whole article; leading to feelings of exclusion, such as are expressed by an Asian author: "You [journal editors] are not inclusive enough. We feel that we have the best data but it gets rejected with no question" (Shohamy, E. personal communication, 25 July 2018).

Therefore, this paper aims to understand how plurilingual novice writers experience the task of writing high-stakes articles in English. Since many academic journals adhere to native-speaker standards, papers submitted by plurilingual writers, especially those who are novices, are often rejected, hindering their advancement within academia, and not allowing the academic community to benefit from their contributions to scientific and academic research.

Methods

The Israeli Context

Israeli higher education constitutes an ideal setting for examining plurilingual writers since most students are bi- or trilingual, speaking Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, Amharic, French, Spanish, and Chinese, among others. This includes not only local Israeli students, but a sizeable international student body as well. In Israel, Hebrew is the language of instruction in schools for the Jewish population, and in Arabic for the Arabic-speaking population, with English being taught from the third grade for a few hours a week. To be accepted to university, students must achieve a B1 level in English. However, at university, the language of instruction is predominantly Hebrew, with only some courses given in English at the BA/BSc level. In the STEM disciplines, sometimes the language of instruction is English, but even when it is not, students are expected

to write exclusively in English, as well as publish from an early stage. This is not the case in non-STEM disciplines, where students study and mainly publish in Hebrew.

At Tel Aviv University, we teach graduate writing courses in the major disciplines, which help prepare our plurilingual students for publishing their research in peer-reviewed English-language journals. In addition, we provide individual support for faculty, students from other institutions, and administrative staff in our academic writing and communication center. After instructing these populations for over 10 years, we have come to realize the immense complexity involved in the juxtaposition of our students' voices – often colored by the special "music" born of their multiple languages – with the academic publishing world.

Participants

To understand the processes that emergent plurilingual academic writers undergo when writing in English, we conducted 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with students who had attended our courses and/or our writing/language center. We chose students/writers from a wide range of fields, to hopefully get a fuller picture of what novice writers undergo in many disciplines. All our interviewees are at least bi- or tri-lingual (see Table 1).

Table 1

Interviewees' disciplinary and language backgrounds

Pseudonyms	Degree/Field	Country of Origin / Languages	Writing Project/s
Yi Ze	MA in Environmental Sciences	From China / Mandarin L1, proficient in English	Writing thesis in English
Gustavo	MSc Life Sciences/Zoology	From Venezuela / Spanish L1, proficient in English	Writing MSc and an article in English
Bethany	PhD in Education	From Ethiopia / Tigrinya L1, proficient in Amharic, Hebrew, with low proficiency in English	Writing PhD in Hebrew; writing an article in English
Chani	PhD in Literature	From Israel / Hebrew L1, proficient in English	Writing PhD in Hebrew and grant proposals in English
Lali	PhD in Latin American Studies	From Israel / Hebrew L1, but had a private Spanish teacher privately as a young girl; proficient in Spanish and English	Writing PhD in Hebrew, but last year she did a semester in Madrid and wrote four seminar papers in Spanish; writing an article in English
Pedro	PhD in History	From Spain / Spanish L1, proficient in English, Italian, Hebrew	Writing PhD and an article in English
Sapir	PhD in Art	From Israel / Hebrew L1, proficient in English and French	Writing an article in English

Tayyaba	PhD in Sociology/Gender Studies	From Israel / Arabic L1, proficient in Hebrew and English	Writing PhD in Hebrew; writing an article in English
Tamara	PhD in Sociology	From Israel / Hebrew L1, proficient in English	Writing PhD in Hebrew; writing an article in English
Laura	PhD in Neuroscience/Engineering	From Israel / Hebrew L1, but both parents are Turkish and speak to each other in Turkish. During her childhood, her mother also spoke to her in French. Proficient in English	Writing PhD in English
Oren	Post doc in Mathematics	From Israel / Hebrew L1, proficient in English.	Teaching in USA and writing papers for publication in English
Avner	Associate Professor, Jewish Studies	From Israel / Hebrew L1, proficient in French, English, Yiddish, and Polish	Giving a new course in English for the first time to international undergraduate students and writing articles in English

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in English and/or Hebrew, depending on the interviewee's preference, lasted between 40-50 minutes each, were recorded, and subsequently transcribed. Both of us were present for most of the interviews. The writers were asked about their linguistic background, their writing and publication history, the process they go through when writing an academic text or text for professional purposes, and the challenges they might face when writing in English. All participants signed an informed consent form approved by the University's Ethical Committee, and pseudonyms were used for all students.

After the recorded interviews we, the researchers, transcribed and analyzed the content to find common threads and patterns in their reports. Each of us transcribed half of the interviews. We used the qualitative content analysis method outlined in Bengtsson (2016), wherein content analysis is defined as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 9). The data were coded in tables into general categories (negative statements, positive statements, and creative aspects). This led to a further breakdown into subcategories that were adapted several times according to the new aspects that came up in different interviews. Afterwards, the data were triangulated with each of us relistening and reading the transcripts, and reanalyzing the data. In the end, we found three main categories all of our interviewees referred to: the barriers/obstacles they encountered when writing in English (Barriers to Writing in English), the gains they found when writing in English (Gains from Writing in English), and issues that could be considered gains for the general academic community (Gains for the Academic Community).

Results

In this paper we present the voices of our interviewees to illustrate the different categories with the hope that you, the reader, find their eloquent voices as compelling as we did. After each quotation we added the languages available to each plurilingual speaker, aside from English, in parenthesis.

Barriers to Writing in English for Plurilingual Writers

Writing for publication is an extremely onerous task for native speakers as well, so that drawing attention to L2 researchers' challenges not only creates an outdated competence model but may also discourage L2 researchers while downplaying the difficulties encountered by L1 academics (Hyland, 2016). Yet, some interviewees did mention that they found writing, being an arduous task, easier in their first languages, and gave varied reasons for this.

Many mentioned the fact that their proficiency level in English was lower than in their L1.

> *Pedro* – "I find myself always double-checking the way I write and express myself in Google, to see whether it is correct; prepositions, idioms."
> "It is easier to write in Spanish, it is more '*richful*' and I have more synonyms in Spanish." (Spanish, Hebrew)
>
> *Tayyaba* – "Because what I can say or write in English is more limited, the level of the content is lower. If I could write in Hebrew or Arabic, I would have much more to say; it would be more detailed, more complex, richer." (Arabic, Hebrew)

Since many of our interviewees felt their proficiency level was lower in English, they resorted to first writing in their L1 and then translating the writing into English, but this process was sometimes counterproductive.

> Chani – "I first write in Hebrew and then translate, because my thinking in English is very slow and different. Even though I change many things when I translate the writing. Ideas that sound great in Hebrew, don't sound well in English. In English you have to make them more precise. I revise and try for it not to sound like a translation, but it always is. My thinking process is less developed in English. I don't know how to think about the complex concepts I work with in English. Even if I read the theory and sources in English, I think my mind 'translates' them into Hebrew." (Hebrew)
>
> Pedro – "My sentences flow better in Spanish in longer sentences, and then I have to reread and edit (cut) for English. It feels like my writing style gets lost when writing in English. There are expressions that cannot be translated." (Spanish, Hebrew)

Another aspect that is impacted by their lower proficiency level in English is their self-confidence when writing in English, which in turn affects the whole writing process.

> *Lali* (who is a native Hebrew speaker) – "I think my English is stronger than my Spanish, but I feel more comfortable writing in Spanish. I think it is because I have lower expectations of myself when writing Spanish, and I give myself more credit when writing Spanish. Because I am more critical of myself in English, it is more complicated, even though I am better in English. I am afraid of making mistakes in English; in Spanish, if I make a mistake, it bothers me less. I love writing in Hebrew and feel more confident when writing Hebrew." (Hebrew, Spanish)

Others talked about the changes demanded in their writing style by the different languages. This could be seen as what Englander (2014, p. 58) termed the writer-responsible nature of English (as opposed to Hebrew, which is more reader-responsible).

> *Chani* – "In English, you have to be very specific about the way things are connected, while in Hebrew you don't have to be very specific; things just 'sound' connected as they are. It is not just about the words and connectors; it is how you position ideas that is different. From studying American and Hebrew literature I see the differences; how each language allows you to express different things." (Hebrew)

Some commented that something in the English language itself or the mere fact of writing in EAL affected their thinking and thereby altered their writing process.

> *Lali* – "… in Hebrew I simply write without thinking about the meaning of every word. I work at the sentence level, not at the word level. *This different connection to the way things are expressed influences how we comprehend the idea we are writing about.*" (Hebrew, Spanish)

Lali here illustrates the well-known fact that 'writing is thinking' (Arapoff, 1967; Oatley & Djikic, 2008) so that when she can write only 'locally' she cannot yet process and connect the different concepts into higher-order ideas, as she would in her L1.

Another interesting and common remark was that writing in English did not enable them to fully express themselves and their personalities, and thereby something was lost in the writing process.

> *Bethany* – "Amharic is the strongest among all my languages. It sings to you – touches your head, heart, emotions. Even when you are talking, it sounds like a poem, a sweet melody. [She read to us something that someone wrote/said.] See how much power words have! Other languages don't do that."
> "When I write in Amharic it 'touches' you – for example when I wrote about my mother, I started to cry – as opposed to when I wrote about her in Hebrew. When I wrote about her in Amharic – it's poetry, a song/poem – full of feelings. The melody is different (Amharic vs Hebrew). How it affects me as well as how it comes out (for the reader) – you reach/touch them." (Tigrinya, Amharic, Hebrew)

> *Chani* – "When I write in Hebrew, I HAVE a Voice – a specific voice. In English, I don't think I have a voice. I feel I lose some of my personality." (Hebrew)

Sadly, sometimes the difficult process of trying to get published is not conducive to gaining confidence in writing in English. Some academic advisors lack the tools for teaching and empowering their students in the writing phase of their research. For example,

> *Sapir* – "When I write something I send it to my advisor for approval, and my advisor changes the writing and style so much that I sometimes no longer connect to the text (and sometimes I don't even recognize what is there). I tell myself that the main thing is to get accepted to the conference or get published, but it feels like the writing is out of my control; it is no longer mine." (Hebrew)

By bringing to light the difficulties mentioned by our interviewees, it is certainly not our intention to perpetuate the discourse of disadvantage (Hyland 2016), but to empower plurilingual writers by making their voices heard, especially since difficulties are not the whole picture.

Gains from Writing in English for Plurilingual Writers

While we expected to hear about the difficulties and obstacles in writing in English, we were pleasantly surprised to hear some of the remarks regarding what our interviewees had gained through the effort of writing in English. These gains ranged from simple linguistic benefits to more complex intellectual advantages.

Among the linguistic benefits are better proficiency and language skills, and greater confidence in English.

> *Bethany* – "I am writing my dissertation in Hebrew but will need to write papers/articles in English. I've started listening a lot to English – yet am frustrated that I don't have time. More recently though I started listening to podcasts in English while I'm driving. I better understand the different [English] accents. I hope that when I finish my PhD I'll continue [to study] English – in an English-speaking country." (Tigrinya, Amharic, Hebrew)

> *Pedro* – "I now write directly in English, instead of translating from Spanish, and what I want to say is clearer. I now even take notes in English (from Spanish) sources." "My pronunciation and accent got better." (Spanish, Hebrew)

Interestingly, many mentioned how writing and thinking in English helped them understand the concepts they were investigating better. Tamara felt that it was the different nature of the English language, namely it being writer-responsible (Englander, 2014, p. 58) that aided her.

> *Tamara* – "Even though I am writing my dissertation in Hebrew, forcing myself to write the ideas in English is important to sharpen my ideas. English is a very linear language in which the writer has to 'connect everything' logically for the reader. Hebrew is not like that. You can get away with saying something in a roundabout manner and it sounds good. Writing in English forces me to think more clearly and verbalize the relationship between my ideas." (Hebrew)

This was different for Lali and Avner; as it was the cognitive gap of thinking in a different language, not necessarily something having to do with English itself, that helped them understand and write about the concepts better.

> *Lali* – "I derive a lot of pleasure from being able to express myself in a language that is not my own. The process focuses, sharpens my thoughts; brings cognitive clarity. And that is very rewarding." (Hebrew, Spanish)

> *Avner* – "Writing in English helps me now to think outside of the Hebrew. For example, thinking about things that for me are very spiritual, like the Kabbalah 'spheres' – to take the key concepts (*binah*, *chochmah*, etc.) and talk about them in English doesn't necessarily make them sound poor, but rather more accessible in a way and more secular. In Hebrew, they have a religious connotation, so I'm 'trapped' by that connotation, whereas English has helped me to look at the concepts in a more 'academic' way." (Hebrew, French, Yiddish, Polish)

In line with Avner's notion of language embodied concepts, Chani comments that language is connected to its culture. For her, the distancing aspect of the language was useful in her research.

> *Chani* – "Distance from the culture allows for a more critical perspective." (Hebrew)

Contribution to the Academic Community from Plurilingual Writers

Being able to read and write academically in various languages has an impact, not only on the writer personally, but also on the research community on several levels. One such level is metalinguistic awareness and knowledge, which provides writers with a wealth of styles and options that can be 'imported' from different language cultures, thus enriching English-language publications. An example of this is what Avner says:

> *Avner* – "As we know there are different ways to write in academia – one can write in a very cold and objective style or one can express one's self very emotionally. And there are some styles – for example in Philosophy in France (for example Continental Philosophy), sometimes in academic papers, they write about their own selves … In my writing I try to find a balance between expressing myself as a unique person and also advancing academic ideas." (Hebrew, French, Yiddish, Polish)

The different cultural practices can also impact how researchers approach research itself, not just the linguistic aspects, but what it actually means to understand a phenomenon and how to study it more precisely. As when doing transdisciplinary work, having access to diverse epistemological approaches can enrich academic protocols and traditions.

> *Yi Ze* – "My English-speaking friends just present a phenomenon and analyze it, and that is enough for the MA committee. I cannot do that. I need to understand what brought about this phenomenon; what caused it historically, socially, economically.
> It is like the difference between Western medicine that focuses on treating symptoms, and Chinese medicine that seeks to understand the causes of the symptoms." (Mandarin)

But the benefits the academic community can gain from plurilingual/pluricultural writers need not be only paradigmatic but can also be linguistic. Our interviewees found creative ways to deal with vocabulary gaps; either in the English language or in their own vocabularies, thus producing linguistically rich texts.

Some of our interviewees use nonstandard words that are perfectly transparent, thereby adding neologisms to the English language.

> *Pedro* – "I am *overflooded* with work right now." (Spanish, Hebrew)

Another strategy is using terms in a different language which do not have exact translations in English.

> Tayyaba – "There are so many concepts in Arabic that I can't translate into other languages. So in my writing, I kept the Arabic word and explained the meaning." (Arabic, Hebrew)

This strategy allows English to gain new words and concepts not previously available.

Discussion and Conclusion

The myriad of voices of plurilingual novice writers in our study are filled with insight and wisdom about the process they undergo when writing for publication. They spoke of a multifaceted experience; one that includes challenges encountered, gains found, and even contributions to the academic world. Our aim here was to present these voices to join the call for a broadening of publishing norms.

Several of the plurilingual novice writers we interviewed mentioned technical challenges on the road to publication in English, ranging from problems due to their smaller vocabularies in English than in their more dominant languages, having problems in syntax, tense-use, and others, to more structural issues emanating from the different attributes and conventions of English writing, and even regarding issues of loss of voice and identity when writing in English. To overcome these challenges, some simply write their papers in Hebrew and send them out to be translated (though they often indicate that the final product does not accurately reflect what they want to say), or, if they write directly in English, turn to outside language editors. Most, though, understand that this process might not help them in the future, and they come to our writing center to learn better skills and strategies for getting their work published. Yet, it is interesting to note that our participants did not focus entirely on the technical aspects of writing, such as the longer time it may take to write, the larger number of iterations each manuscript goes through, or having to recruit language editors or translators; they probably saw these aspects as a given and not a significant part of what writing academically in English (or other LX) entails. Our highly intelligent and articulate participants chose instead to talk about the cognitive, meta-cognitive, and emotional aspects of the process.

Part of this introspection led some of the novice writers to mention benefits gained by writing in English. These ranged from language gains, such as renewed interest in strengthening their

English skills, to enhanced insight into their topics through the psychological distance, reduced emotion, and increased deliberation afforded by writing in a foreign language (Corey et al., 2017; Hayakawa, et al., 2016; Shin & Kim, 2017).

Through the voices of our respondents, we discovered possible gains to the academic community that these plurilingual, pluricultural writers could contribute. In some cases, these gains were linguistic, namely, the introduction of neologisms and new terminology into academic language in English, and, in other cases, nonlinguistic, such as Yi Ze's perspectives into Eastern versus Western research paradigms. As this suggests, much can be gained by listening to these writers who bring to their publications different perceptions and insights to make the whole academic community richer.

The findings of our research indicate that the losses and benefits these novice writers experience can inform pedagogy for multilingual classrooms. Teachers and curriculum developers of English for research and publication purposes (ERPP) should balance the need to continue supporting these writers and providing courses, workshops, and individualized sessions to help them achieve their goal of publication in English language publications, while also keeping a light hand while revising their work and respecting their unique voices; that special music that is a result of the plurality of their languages and cultures, their academic experiences, and their particular personalities. Instructors should have the confidence to encourage students to use their voices more, so that more of these diverse voices are heard within academia, making it less monolithic. They should endeavor to achieve this by, in Turner's (2018, p. 437) words, "build[ing] a climate of positive developmental achievement, rather than maintaining a climate of fear and stigmatisation for getting things wrong."

Aside from our pedagogical recommendations, we would also like to see changes in the publishing world that allow these different voices to be heard. One change could be for journals to provide extra mentoring (Li, 2019, pp. 240-245) and additional rewriting opportunities. Such a change would apprentice these writers into the conventions of English language publications, making them more proficient and less likely to be rejected in the future. A very different approach could be that digital multilingual publications enable authors to write in their own languages, while providing hyperlinks to translations to make the paper accessible to a wider public (Shohamy, E., personal communication, 25 July 2018).

Surprisingly, an equalizing factor for plurilingual novice writers are already coming by way of technological innovations. Recent trends in the publishing world are changing the publishing landscape, and new journal formats are currently appearing that not only offer more communication possibilities but can make publishing more achievable (Sperling, 2018). For example, one could publish one's research in shorter publications, such as scientific letters or in publications such as SpringerBriefs, Stanford Briefs, Princeton Shorts, that allow more flexible language and style. Another technological outcome of online publications is the birth of more graphic communication styles and guidelines, such as the possibility of submitting visual abstracts and peer-reviewed video articles. As stated on Elsevier's website, these "make the core message of the article easy to access" by integrating visual means (Elsevier, n.d.).

However, we believe that, despite having brought to light the many obstacles that our novice plurilingual writers face on the road to publication in English language journals, and despite the gains experienced, a wider problem still exists. The native-speaker norms in the publication world create asymmetries of power that reflect deep seated ideologies about the inherent value of the research produced in English and the inferiority of non-Anglophone research (Ammon, 2012; Canagarajah & Matsumoto, 2017; Marshall & Moore, 2018). Plurilingualism is a competence and an asset; and this needs to be recognized to challenge the "discourses of deficit, (in)competence, and open[s] up spaces for a plurality of languages" (Marshall & Moore, 2018, p. 22) and we strive to empower our students to make their unique voices heard. This stance thereby requires an ethically imperative call for the academic publishing boundaries to become more elastic and inclusive (Habibie, 2019, p. 48), allowing the global academic community to gain from different plurilingual and pluricultural voices.

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