

Original Paper

Writing for Publication in English: Challenges and Prospects

Abdel Rahman Abdalla Salih^{1*}, Holi Ibrahim Holi² & Lauren Clark²

¹ Department of English Language & Literature, Al-Zahra University College for Women, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

² Department of English Language and Literature, Rustaq College of Applied Sciences, Sultanate of Oman

*Abdel Rahman Abdalla Salih, E- mail: aykistar@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate English teachers' perceptions about the importance of writing for publication in English, and the challenges that they encounter. The subjects were 30 teachers from 3 departments in a public college in Oman. The instrument was a 3-question survey on difficulties and challenges in writing for publication in English faced by the tutors. The respondents' answers were analysed and classified. The results revealed two types of challenges identified initially: discursive (language-related) and non-discursive (non-language-related) challenges. A third challenge which has been termed others was discovered. The findings also highlighted the importance of the growing popularity of research activity by non-native English speakers in the non-English speaking countries. The study also suggested the key role higher education institutes should play in boosting research contributions by academic staff and curbing the problems of publishing in the English Language from a new standpoint.

Keywords

writing for publication in English, discursive and non-discursive challenges, prospects

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Getting a scholarly article published is a complex process for multilingual peripheral scholars across disciplines in general and for both novice and experienced English and core subject teachers in particular (Cheung, 2010, p. 134). Writing for publication consists of some basics of English writing skills such as careful and consistent word choices; short, clear and direct sentences; writing in the active voice; writing unified, coherent and well-structured paragraphs, stylistic uniformity, maintain brevity, and clear thinking with sound argument, etc. (Fahy, 2002, p. 113, Moldovan, 2011, p. 392). Therefore, the majority of teachers encounter numerous difficulties when writing their articles in English for their possible publication in mainstream journals. This process is difficult because it

involves having high level of expertise, having a sound and high argument, mastering scholarly academic genre and, having a good mastery of English as well as getting access to a community of academic discourse. Coates et al. (2002) claim that researcher's poor linguistic skills frequently go hand in hand with paper rejection. On the other hand, English language has witnessed remarkable changes and development outside its traditional homeland forming new varieties of significant importance. This paper seeks to explore a sensitive and critically neglected research area in Oman and to answer issues pertaining to the way faculty members view writing for publication in English, causes that make writing for publication in English difficult, the importance of writing for publication in English as perceived by faculty members as well as some of the possible strategies that can encourage faculty members to write for publication. To serve its end, a questionnaire with open-ended questions was distributed to 30 faculty members in three departments in a public college namely; English Language and Literature (DELL), International Business Administration (IBA), and Information Technology (IT) to explore difficulties when they experienced in writing for publication in English and find out their views about the importance of writing for publication in English. The conclusions that the study drew are deemed important as they may provide some advice to help researchers, practitioners to overcome the difficulties that they face in writing for publication in English.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to determine the challenges that teachers face when they write for publication in English, the prospects which might be gained from publication and to find out some strategies which might help teachers and researcher to overcome these challenges.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is an addition to the different studies that have been conducted in the areas of investigating importance and challenges in writing for publication in English language. This study is supposed to assist teachers and researchers to overcome problems related to writing for publication in English. It is therefore anticipated that this study will have useful implications for developing teachers as researchers and the findings are expected to offer insights and practical ideas for potential scholars to write for publication in English.

1.4 Study Questions

- 1) How do faculty members view writing for publication in English?
- 2) Why is writing for publication in English difficult? How important is writing for publication in English for faculty members?
- 3) What are some of the possible strategies that can encourage faculty members to write for publication?

1.5 Theoretical Framework

Writing for publication is of utmost importance as it is usually used for hiring, promotion, and continued employment (Belcher, 2007). The dominance of English as a center-controlled publishing medium may be obvious on the expenses of the visibility of other languages to appear in main stream

center journals (Flowerdew, 2001). Flowerdew (1999a) surveyed Chinese academics about publishing in English and found that a considerable number of them expressed inability to write technically in English. Figure 1) below, based on Ferguson, 2007 & Canagarajah, 1999, was developed to illustrate some challenges teachers and researchers face when they write for publication in English.

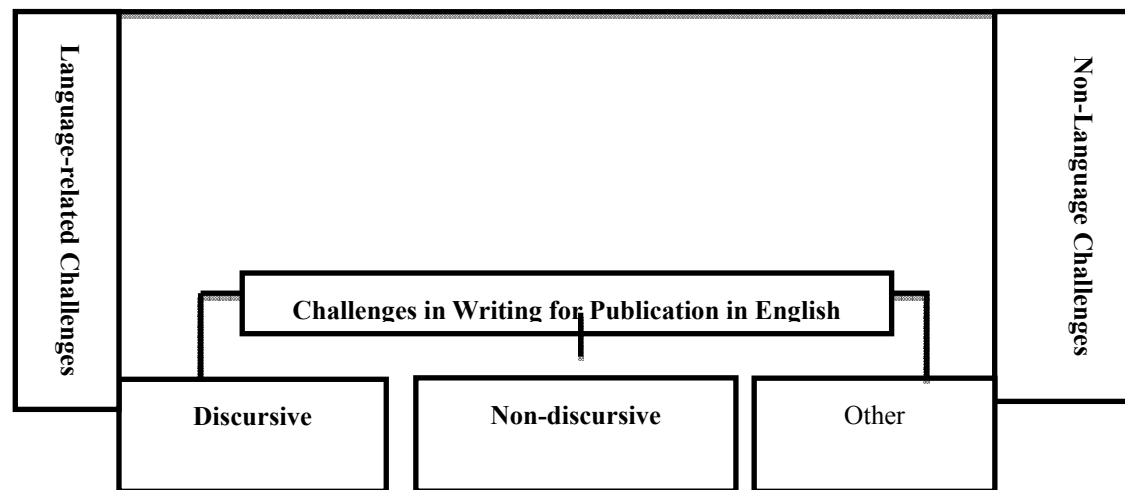


Figure 1. Challenges in Writing for Publication in English

1.6 What Makes Writing for Publication in English Important?

There is little doubt that the use of English as an international language of communication can facilitate networking and exchange of ideas, expertise among academics and professionals (Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008, p. 109). In many academic institutions worldwide, English—medium publications have come to have *higher status* and constitute a major criterion for promotion and for supporting scholars' research grant applications (Canagarajah, 1996; Flowerdew, 2000; Yakhontova, 1997). "Publish or perish" is considered as a common adage in academic environments which is irrespective to the language of publication because "*scholarly publications structure academic career almost in all over the world and in almost all disciplines*" (Salager-Meyer, 2013, p. 1). But writing for publication in *English* is important in today's world. It is considered essential to advancement of the profession (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2002; Nelms, 2004 cited in Keen, 2007). Researchers (e.g. Flowerdew, 1999a) argued that English language has become the leading language of international scholarship and research and the dominant language of information. The researcher also points out that "journals publishing in language other than English tend to be included in the databases and they consequently are not held by libraries internationally" (p. 243). The need to publish in English and to gain recognition in the international community is of utmost importance for academics (Huang, 2010, p. 34). English-medium for publications offers a forum for multilingual scholars to disseminate their research broadly (Curry & Lillis, 2010, p. 282). Refereed journals written in English often considered a prerequisite for reward, tenure and promotion in universities in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2010). Therefore,

scholars increasingly need to publish in English (Flowerdew, 2010, p. 77). On the other hand, Lewkowicz identifies reasons for publishing in English which include: most periodicals are in English, it has the widest possible readership, the most widely accepted language in academia, it enables international cooperation between scholars, all important discussions are in English, it helps you to avoid the need to translate, and it is the only way to become a recognized scholar (Lewkowicz, 2010, p. 113).

1.7 Why Is Writing for Publication in English Difficult?

English language is the dominant medium of international academic journals and publication and achievement in academia. But professional and academic writing are structurally compelling and demanding (Biber & Gary, 2010, p. 2). It creates many challenges for scholars in peripheral countries to write publishable article (Huang, 2010, p. 33). These challenges can be classified into two main categories such as discursive (language-related) and non-discursive (non-language-related). Non-native scholar's language deficiency and lack of proficiency can make them fall short of reviewers and editors expectations (Curry & Lillis, 2004 cited in Huang, 2010, p. 33). Entering the professional discourse community is a long, stressful process (Belcher, 1994). Scholars identified several problems which make writing for publication difficult for non-speakers of English. One of these scholars is Flowerdew who investigated Chinese scholars' problems with writing for publication in English. He found that their problems as follow: they lack facility of expression; difficulty in succeeding in discourse community, it takes them long time to write in English; they lack rich vocabulary; they find it difficult to make claims or structure their arguments, their process of composition may be influenced by their L1; how to write and analyze, writing unified, coherent and well-structured paragraphs, synthesizing, ideas they find it difficult to structure a scholarly introductions and discussions, they are more capable of writing quantitative articles than qualitative ones, (Okamura, 2006; Fahy, 2008; Flowerdew, 1999a, p. 243). Moreover, there are some other problems which are reported in the literature such as grammar; use of citations; making reference to the published literature; structuring of argument; textual organization, use of "hedges; interference of different cultural views with regard to the nature of academic processes, low quality of research, lack of methodological rigor" (Lewkowicz, 2008; Adams-Smith, 1984; Bazerman, 1988; Dudley-Evans, 1994; Johns, 1993, Mauranen, 1993; St. John, 1987; Swales, 1990 cited in Flowerdew, 1999a, p. 247). St. Johns (1987) added that research has proved that writing introductions and discussion sections are more problematic that other sections such as methodology and results.

Furthermore, the most frequently indicated serious difficulties by Chinese non-native speakers of English in writing for publication in English are: technical problems with the English language such as rhetorical patterning and genre, textual organization, innovative and divergent thinking, how to develop their own voice, writer's block, and reporting the literature (Al Fadda, 2012; Flowerdew, 1999a, p. 248). Other scholars such as Ferguson (2010), as has already been stated, classify the challenges which are encountered by peripheral countries' scholars as falling into two categories: *discursive*

(language-related challenges) or *non-discursive* (non-language-related challenges). The third category in this paradigm is paramount to understanding the restrictions placed upon publishing in English. As can be seen from the table above, this third tenet is entitled “other” and it is a general category which refers to all challenges of publishing which are not explicitly related to language. These, in the main are intangible factors. They can include the issues of plagiarism, emotional and psychological factors, motivation, understanding the culture of the audience for which an article is going to be written, establishing academic voice, lack of awareness and funding issues.

The difficulty in meeting these standards, the standards of international journals tend to put non-native speakers of English scholars at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* their native counterparts when they compete for publication (Huang, 2010, p. 34). Non-discursive challenges include lack of availability of resources such as supplies, absent or unreliable communication means, lack of equipment and Internet access, lack of budget for specialized editorial staff, lack of training, lack of research and clerical assistance, difficulties with corresponding with editors, and reviewers, lack of proper academic discourse and writing styles, difficulty in interpreting comments and suggestions made by referees and editors, lack financial sources (teaching release time, funds for travel or help with manuscripts), unreliable mailing services, and social help from colleagues, supervisors, collaborators, journals and book editors (Canagarajah, 1996, 2002; Salager-Meyer, 2008). Furthermore, additional costs in producing linguistically adequate texts are one of the problems which non-native speakers of English scholars experience (Flowerdew, 2008).

1.8 Other and Its Implications

Whilst the significance of *discursive* and *non-discursive* categories must be stressed, this study unveiled an important third category of problems related to publishing which was heretofore unanticipated. The researchers expected a series of linguistic and pragmatic challenges and the implications of academic discourse to be the predominant complaints from their respondents. Nonetheless, comments such as “I miscommunicate my ideas”, “nobody will do it for free”, “I need a mentor” and the difficulties of publishing to “meet[ing] a Western audience” voiced serious concerns which are linked to the emotional and cultural implications of English Language publishing. These are not peripheral issues but central aspects concerning the feelings of self-worth and aptitude attached to academic writing. Such comments appeared across a host of the questionnaires from academic staff who were both native and nonnative speakers of English. In the sample, the terms “value”, “worth”, “prejudice”, “empowerment” and “confidence” featured heavily in addressing the difficulties with writing for publication in English. As Belcher (2007) has argued in an article which compares peer reviews, “off-network” or geographically and linguistically isolated scholars are particularly likely to overlook the fruits of constructive criticism because of their unfamiliarity with and exclusion from the English language publishing circuit. This has been viewed as a form of “silencing” by Kramsch and Lam (1999) and relates to the feelings of prejudice expressed by some of our respondents. However, we would argue that a binary native/non-native based study about English Language publishing is

redundant and limiting considering the “other” factors which impinge upon publishing. Our respondents shared emotional and motivational publishing implications regardless of whether or not English was their mother tongue. This bolsters the generalized paradigm that we have adopted which makes use of native and non-native respondents’ opinions through the frame of publishing considerations.

1.9 Mapping Commonalities and Differences

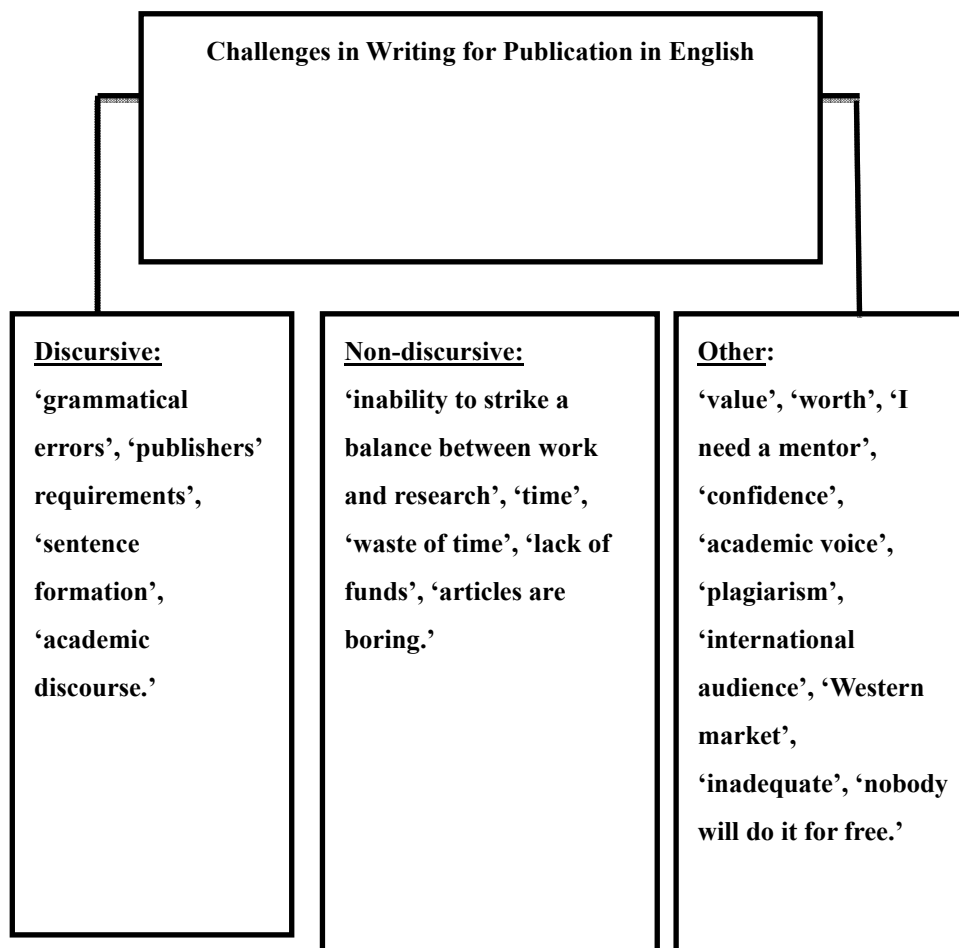


Figure 2. Common Challenges in Writing for Publication in English

This model developed with respondents feedback and based on Ferguson, 2007 & Canagarajah, 1999.

As can be seen from the figure above, the tripartite structure of the analysis that was undertaken enabled our research to be stratified into distinct categories which appreciated the language-related, non-language-related and extra-linguistic problems of publishing in English. Rather than being hemmed in by valid and fruitful debates about linguistic discrimination and publishing prejudice between the native and non-native dichotomy [such as the ongoing theory wars between Christine

Casanave and John Flowerdew]. The *discursive*, *non-discursive* and *other* approach permitted commonalities and differences to be clearly enlisted in separate categories. As such, “academic discourse” [i.e. the appropriate tone and approach to writing scholarly articles as opposed to writing in other genres like journals] falls under the *discursive* category as it is related to the use of the English language in publishing. On the other hand, the seemingly comparable but completely unique matter of “academic voice” [i.e. the subjective input a researcher has in synthesizing material and forming an opinion on the information that they receive] can be enlisted under *other* as it is an intangible problem which has strong links to the confidence and experience of the researcher. In the same vein, the academic “worth” that English teachers associate with their publishing capabilities can be mapped alongside the lack of financial support and “funding” shortages we have enlisted as a *non-discursive* factor. Essentially then, mapping the problems highlighted in this sample suggest that it is respective abundance and lack of tangible and intangible qualities that affects the production of published material. This means that factors which are external to a basic competency of language have a huge impact upon how teachers research. The surveys we received complained of a lack of time and resources but in the main emphasized the positive aspects of publishing for research, membership of an academic community and professional development purposes. Indeed, of our respondents very few viewed publishing as being a useless endeavor and fewer still implied that the roles of academic and language teacher need be separate.

Further to this, it was observed that in half of the surveys [15] we received, *discursive factors* were mentioned. Namely, these included “grammatical errors” and concerns about sentence formation and syntactical awareness in written English academic discourse. In the majority of cases, these comments were made in response to question 4 [“What sort of difficulties do you encounter with writing for publication in English?”] but in some instances these comments appeared in response to question 3 [Do you think that writing for publication in English is important? If yes or no say why?]. Such comments emanated from over 50% of our respondents and highlighted a commonality in findings but a difference in research output. Initially, the *discursive factors* we found suggested non-subjective feedback however, in the analysis of our data we realized that our respondents’ commentaries and fears about language-related aspects of publishing made them very objective indeed. In terms of the *other* category, whilst one might expect extra-discursive material that is highly objective to appear here, nonetheless there an array of responses were received that could be computed in discursive terms. For instance, the issues of “academic voice” and “plagiarism” which appeared in only 3 of our surveys, could be interpreted in objective and subjective ways as they are practical editorial concerns and also represent the fears of many researchers new to the academic market. One respondent noted that “meeting the Western audience” was a prerequisite of publishing and research which has language based (*discursive*) and cultural (*other*) repercussions for the researcher.

1.10 Peer Reviews

Challenges in Writing for Publication in English: Three CAS colleagues' peer review feedback.		
<p><u>Discursive:</u></p> <p>'The article contains spelling mistakes and variations, verbal repetitions and grammatical errors as well as inappropriate lexical choices'</p> <p>'The title of the paper doesn't really capture the breadth of what the paper does.'</p> <p>'Some minor grammatical errors symptomatic of English second language speakers.'</p>	<p><u>Non-discursive:</u> 'Confusing chronology'</p> <p>'Results presentation is fine and conclusions drawn are fine.'</p> <p>'Explicitly state the hypotheses being tested.'</p> <p>'Some points which should be taken into account in terms of mechanics of writing, e.g. Spacing, capitalization, etc.'</p>	<p><u>Other :</u></p> <p>'The paper gave me [a?]good impression and to me it seems [a?] justified and breakthrough research.'</p> <p>'Disconcerting'</p> <p>'Bewildering'</p>

Figure 3. Three CAS Colleagues' Peer Review Feedback

The model in Figure3 above is developed with CAS colleagues' peer review feedback and is based on Ferguson (2007) & Canagarajah (1999)

As with all editorial criticism it is important to distinguish between valid, constructive, well-meaning feedback and scholarly attacks. It is useful here to make a brief link to how three CAS colleagues' peer review feedback can be mapped on the *discursive*, *non-discursive* and *other* paradigm. We surveyed two English colleagues' editorial feedback and a IBA colleague's editorial feedback on articles which were submitted to international journals and subject to blind reviews. Whilst two of the papers were accepted, one was rejected outright, In the figure above, it can be seen that the *other* category contains far less tangible publishing encouragement or discouragement when compared to our respondents' *other* publishing problems which were an acumen of abundance and lack. A "good impression" and "disconcerting" are used here to give editors' subjective feedback whereas our surveyors sought "value" and "worth" in their writing. To this end, there is a mismatch between what *other* factors

teachers seek in publishing [whether they are emotional fulfillment, confidence or recognition] and that which they are provided with in peer review feedback. Nonetheless, the *discursive* and *non-discursive* extracts from the reviews above evidence those linguistic factors are problematic for native and non-native speakers respectively. As such, the native speaker concerned in this research was subject to commentaries about their written English by a native English reviewer in a unconstructive way. Similarly, using the terms “disconcerting” and “bewildering” to describe a piece of research is unnecessarily literary and provocative. They suggest that the material produced is worrying and baffling without due explication and for this reason they have been placed in the *others* category. In comparing figures 2.4 and 2.5 there is a clear disparity between what CAS colleagues seek from publishing and what challenged they face, together with what output or gain those CAS colleagues who have published are faced with. The *others* category in our paradigm is very significant in reflecting this because the expectations and delivered feedback jar in an extreme way and offer some explication as to why subjective factors are still paramount in the process of garnering publications.

2. Methods

This study is exploratory in nature as it attempts to explore the possible difficulties encountered by non-native English teachers while seeking publication in journals using English. The study specifically investigates the non-native English teachers’ perceptions toward the challenges they face when trying to get published in the refereed journals. To serve its objective, the study utilised one instrument-a questionnaire comprising 3 crucial questions relating to the importance of English as an international research language, the issues perceived obstacles for research by teacher researchers, and suggested solutions (see Appendix A). Total 30 teachers serving in 3 different academic departments took part in the data collection exercise. The questionnaires were collected and analysed.

3. Results and Discussions

As stated earlier, the study attempts to explore non-native English teachers’ perceptions about what perceived difficulties and challenges in research activities and publication are. To analyse the data collected, the study adopted a framework by classifying the challenges into “discursive” (language-related), “non-discursive” (non-language related), and “other”. In responding to the question about the importance of writing for publication in English, all the respondents agreed that writing in English is very important.

3.1 Views about Publication in English

All the respondents reported that writing for publication in English is an important activity citing the importance of English language as a major motive. For instance, one of the teachers responded by stating “yes, of course English is the language which is internationally recognised and widely used for communication”. Another teacher reported that “I think it important nowadays because English represents the medium of academic publishing meant for publishing works. Most well-reputable

journals were written in English. English also a medium for most writing in science and technology". Some expressed the view that they tend to write in English for publication to meet promotion and renewal of tenure requirements. In this regard, one of the respondents stated that *"yes, for young professionals: for PhD preparation, to get promoted, for professional development, to share knowledge and findings. Another teacher suggested "I think it is very important because it can be an addition to the CV, promotion and contact renewal"*. This positive response supports the idea that teachers are aware of the significance of mastering English language as a world major language. Some research has shown the importance of English as an international research language. For instance, (Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008) have reported that the use of English might facilitate intellectual communication among faculty researchers and contribute to their professional development as well. It is a pertinent fact that the dominance of English as an international lingua franca has significant implications for research writing by faculty members in both outer circle and expanding circle.

3.2 Discursive

The analysis revealed that respondents have identified grammar, lack of specialized vocabulary, research-related discourse, sentence formation and writing style as linguistic challenges for writing scholastically in English. This finding supports the previous research in the area (see for instance, Al Fadda, 2012; Flowerdew, 1999a) which reported the linguistic challenges non-native English teachers encounter when writing for publication in English. Lack of proficiency in Standard English as well as mastery of research-related register can be considered as a major challenge for faculty members trying to publish in English.

3.3 Non-Discursive

The non-discursive aspect covers issues pertaining to non-linguistic issues in writing for publication in English. The areas that have been identified by the respondents as non-language issues in writing for publication in English included research skills, analytical and interpreting skills, limited sources, limited access to reliable sources, high cost, prejudice toward non-native writers, administrative responsibilities, lack of institution support, lack of proper laboratories, and poor research skills. Moreover, the respondents identified heavy teaching load, lack of research communities and interest group, publishers' slow response, lack of research funds, difficulty in finding suitable publishers, some reviewers' discouraging feedback as well as difficulty in selecting publishable research topics as non-language related obstacles to writing in English.

3.4 Suggested Strategies

The respondents were asked to identify the role of higher education institutions in encouraging faculty members to indulge into research activities. The respondents believed that institutions of higher education's serious involvement in research activities are imperative. The respondents believed that these academic institutions can contribute in supporting scholarly activities by organizing workshops by professional researchers, conferences, reducing of teaching load, research grants, incentive and reward for faculty members active in research, and linking performance appraisal with research. Thus,

academic institutions need to take serious steps to ensure research is placed as a top priority in their strategic planning and staff professional development programmes.

4. Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

The spread and popularity of English in the international arena is an unprecedented linguistic phenomenon which has brought remarkable implications for teachers aspiring to publish in refereed journals writing in English. The current situation presents a very gloomy picture for the non-native English teachers who try to publish in English. The set of language-related and non-language challenges encountered by these teachers show how difficult it is to cope with the current situation and strike a balance between teaching and research. Support by institutions for research is imperative. Colleges and universities better turn into vibrant hubs for annual and biennial conferences, workshops, seminars, symposia where faculty members can find appropriate forums to present, explore and share ideas with other fellow researchers. In addition, local journals with international standards can be a good start for faculty members to publish in English.

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Appendix (A)

Teachers' Questionnaire

Writing for Publication in English: Challenges and Prospects

Dear colleague

I hope you will kindly complete the questionnaire. You may be assured that your responses will be regarded as confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

- 1) Affiliation:
- 2) Department:
- 3) Do you think writing for publication in English important? If yes or no why?
- 4) What sort of difficulties do you encounter with writing for publication in English?
- 5) What should higher education institutions do to encourage teachers to write for publication in English?
- 6) Any comments?