Medical writing for publication in France: The benefits of language assistants

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The acceptance rate of medical manuscripts written by researchers whose mother tongue is not English is generally lower than for native English-speaking authors [1]. Although scientific relevance and the validity of the analysis and results are the most significant factors in the decision to publish an article, the issue of language and writing clearly represents a major stumbling block for these researchers. While articles have been written offering advice on how to improve the linguistic element of articles [2–4], this paper argues that English-speaking language professionals offer a highly valuable service as support staff in hospitals, and that new posts should be created where there is a real need for them.

Depending on the set-up and resources within the hospital environment, authors in France may or may not have access to assistance from native English speakers where manuscripts are concerned. The possibility of obtaining such assistance can be critical for researchers, particularly when submitting work to major international journals. While this type of help is readily available through local agencies offering proofreading or translating services, such assistance can be inconvenient and is not always very personal. Assistance may be available within the hospital context itself, but this is not always the case, particularly in small towns in which little research is carried out, or in sparsely populated regions where fewer native English-speaking language professionals are to be found. In France, writing issues and the availability of help from translators/proofreaders represent obstacles in the publication of medical research. This paper will examine the principal problems encountered by French researchers, seeking a solution to these problems through the use of native English-speaking translators in France’s hospitals.

Difficulties encountered

Before putting pen to paper, or indeed before starting a research study, non-native English speakers may be daunted by the prospect of having to publish in English, and may feel to have a
significant handicap compared to their English-speaking counterparts in the same field of research. Confidence is indeed a major obstacle when it comes to publication, especially when authors feel to be victims of a miscarriage of justice in relation to an editor's refusal of an article. In these cases, a reasoned and well-expressed argument can sometimes cause a decision to be overturned, and is thus worth pursuing. Nonetheless, striking the right tone in the writing of such a letter, which is achieved by numerous factors (such as choosing vocabulary carefully and forming well-constructed sentences which are neither too short nor too long), requires both time and a thorough knowledge of the nuances of English, which are two things many non-native speakers of English authors do not possess. Their awareness of these issues encompasses a psychological barrier to publication.

Of course, this psychological barrier is then manifested in the reality of writing a scientific article. Indeed, a serious problem in France is the lack of knowledge concerning how to write a scientific paper. The structure, content and emphasis of a manuscript can all cause difficulties for a society in which writing research papers is not part of the curriculum for medical students. There is also the problem of incorporating the correct terminology into an article, which can be achieved only if the authors have a thorough grounding in the literature of their field of expertise.

Another physical barrier to publication is finances. While it may be essential to have a paper read by a native English speaker before submission, agency services cannot offer the same personalised service as staff based in the hospital. Of course, employing native English speakers is an expensive alternative, but the benefits must be weighed against these financial implications: clearly, staff should be appointed only where necessary. A language professional able to deal with the research output of an entire hospital could cost less in the long run than paying for agency services, particularly if he or she can help with various aspects of the publication process.

Added to these difficulties is the possibility that other researchers will publish similar original results first, a worry which is compounded by the fear that other specialists in the same field may be native English speakers. Such researchers may also be better known or may become so once their results are published.

The role of the translator/proofreader

Since language is not the only barrier to publication in France, it is not enough for language professionals to work simply on linguistic issues. They should be trained, or be capable of training themselves, in the more general work of scientific writing. They must be able to identify a poorly structured paper, for example, and offer useful advice. Their work can involve many other dimensions which would simplify the task of researchers, such as helping with the bibliography or selecting an appropriate journal, adjusting a paper in line with instructions for authors and assisting with correspondence. The native English-speaking translator/proofreader, therefore, plays a useful role in the entire publication process. This role involves an understanding of the issues involved in publishing original material in international medical journals, as well as an awareness of the particular challenges faced by French researchers in relation to their research background and experience. It also involves an ability to understand the complexities and the language of medical texts. In particular, having native English-speaking translators/proofreaders based in the hospital allows researchers to establish a long-term working relationship with a language professional. The benefits of this set-up are immeasurable for both parties. While the language professional can learn much about the publication process for medical research, and therefore offer a high quality and personalised service, researchers may find their English improving. Although language learning in such a situation may seem a paradoxical notion, the results can be surprising.

The work of researchers must be facilitated to increase the number of scientific articles published by French people. It is easy to state the need for language professionals in hospitals, but harder to implement such an arrangement. In any case, it is vital that jobs should be created only where they are needed in order not to waste money, and that the language professionals are also capable of offering general advice and assistance in the publication process. Posts should be funded in those hospitals whose motivation to succeed in research is proved by success in open calls for proposals. It is therefore essential that all grants awarded for research incorporate a budget for publication, as without publications, medical research is of little value.

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References