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Developing English for Research Publication Purposes in an Outer Circle University Context: Problems and Educational Considerations

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ABSTRACT

To publish their research, EFL writers must develop a particular type of English proficiency called English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP). Despite many advantages of having one research lingua franca, inequalities may occur against writers from particular linguistic or cultural backgrounds. This study, aims to explore problems in research publication from the viewpoints of EFL writers and to evaluate the student writers' perceptions regarding the efficiency of graduate programs in developing ERPP. For these objectives, interviews with EFL writers including M.A. and Ph.D. students (N=11) majoring in TEFL and their professors (N=5) were conducted to explore their problems in way of publishing their research in international journals. In addition, literature was used to develop a researcher-made survey to evaluate student writers' perceptions about the efficiency of TEFL graduate programs. Results showed that this group of EFL writers referred to bias as the most important problem they had in international research publication. However, they also agreed that research conducted by EFL writers suffers from many shortcomings. The results also showed that TEFL graduate program was not regarded efficient in developing ERPP in EFL writers. They did not think that their courses had an influential effect on making them international research writers.

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Training scholars who are able to contribute to the knowledge-making process in different scientific fields is the final aim of almost all higher education programs worldwide. An important way of demonstrating this contribution is through publishing research articles (RA) in international journals. With the spread of university education and research, universities around the world compete to publish more research. Though it has been argued that these days more non-Anglophone scholars and graduate students are

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contributing to research publication (e.g. Master, 1999; Swales, 2004), a closer investigation of credible international journals shows that many non-native scholars and students who use English as an additional language (EAL) and work within English as foreign language (EFL) academic contexts are underprivileged in this regard and do not have equal chances in contributing to their related discourse communities internationally (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Salager-Meyer, 2008). Many of them are forced to publish in local or less cited journals even though the topics of their investigations can be of interest to a larger audience.

While the status of English as the language of research and research publication helps many scholars and students to find more audience for their scientific contributions, share ideas and viewpoints, and have access to huge amounts of resources, this same situation may benefit a particular group, i.e. those for whom this language is the first language, and deprive others who are coming from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. The findings of many studies show that such an inequality does exist (e.g. Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson, Pérez-Llantada & Plo, 2011; Hyland, 2007; Li, 2006; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Salager-Meyer, 2008). The examination of successful publications in journals shows that native writers do have, in fact, many advantages over non-native writers and from among those non-native writers too, some are more advantaged over others. As Salager-Meyer (2008) states, those EAL writers who have lived or studied in Anglophone contexts benefit more than those who use English as a foreign language (EFL). In this study, EFL writers are those who, according to Kachru's (1992) classification of three groups of English-user countries, come from the outer circle where English has no historical background and is used as a foreign language (like Spain, Japan, China, and Iran). In other words, EFL writers are those who have never lived or studied in English-speaking contexts and are studying or have graduated from an EFL university in their own countries. The other two groups in Kachru's classification are the inner circle countries (like the United States or Britain) which use English as their native language and the expanding circle countries (like India, Hong Kong, and Singapore) where English has a historical background and is used as a second or official language. Inequalities in academic research publication between native and non-native writers have deprived many L2 writers from being able to publish in international journals and, as a result, from having a role in the knowledge-making process.

Taking into account the important role of research publications in the promotion of scholars, ranking of universities, and as a requirement for a doctoral or master's degree graduation, such inequalities deprive many EFL writers from the above mentioned benefits as well as from having a role in constructing knowledge in the related discourse communities. Research supports the fact that linguistic and cultural differences work at the disadvantage of non-Anglophone writers from many different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (Canagarajah, 2002; Gosden, 2003; Hyland, 2007). However, except for few works such as Bahrami (2009) and Bahrami and Riazi (2009) who approached this problem very generally, no considerable and comprehensive research has been performed on this topic in Iranian university contexts as an EFL or outer circle context. Moreover, research is rare regarding the effectiveness of graduate programs in EFL universities in developing this particular type of English proficiency which is referred to as English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP). In other words, literature is poor regarding an evaluation of graduate programs offered in EFL universities to examine their efficiency in helping their postgraduate students develop this particular competence. Belonging to a country which is located in the outer circle or EFL group, Iranian research writers have never been the subject of any study regarding being deprived in the international research publication process and its reasons. In addition, literature lacks evaluations of graduate programs and their effectiveness in developing ERPP competence in EFL university contexts in general. As such, the objectives of this study are two-fold. On the first, this study aims to investigate the problems that Iranian academic writers (as an EFL context) have when trying to publish their research in international journals. Secondly, the important role of the educational system in developing this particular type of English competence in EFL academic contexts has not been researched in literature. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the extent to which these programs are

efficient in developing this particular type of English proficiency. Based on these two main objectives, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What problems do Iranian EFL writers (including both scholars and graduate students) have in publishing their research in international journals?
2. As an example of an EFL context, what are the Iranian EFL student writers' perceptions about the efficiency of graduate university programs in developing ERPP competence?

2. Background

2.1. Inequalities in international research publications

As was mentioned earlier, language and linguistic differences can be regarded as the most important factor putting EFL writers at a disadvantage. Based on Kachru's (1992) classification of English-user countries, the scholars in the outer circle seem to be the most marginalized group in this regard. Scholars coming from the inner circle do not have the extra burden of acquiring a new language and, as a result, are at an advantage compared to their non-Anglophone counterparts (Ferguson, 2007; Flowerdew, 1999; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Research has showed that many EFL academic writers from different linguistic backgrounds feel this disparity between themselves and Anglophone counterparts (Ferguson, Pérez-Llantada & Plo, 2011; Li, 2006). Accordingly, in international research journals where "editors are overwhelmed with submissions and are often looking for reasons to reject manuscripts, non-standard language may serve as a good reason as any to justify this" (Hyland, 2007, p. 87).

A second dimension of practicing systematic inequality against EFL writers is the issue of center and periphery (Canagarajah, 2002; Flowerdew, 2013). Taken from the field of political economy, "center" and "periphery" concepts are used to describe developed and underdeveloped countries respectively where center countries "dominate and make dependent on them the 'periphery' states" (Flowerdew, 2013, p. 305). Accordingly, in the area of research publication, international journals, coming from center countries, determine the rhetorical and discursive norms which must be followed by periphery writers. Therefore, periphery writers must learn these norms in order to publish in international journals and, as a result, have more problems in writing and publishing research articles. This causes a devaluation or eradication of the writers' native language rhetorical traditions or as Flowerdew (2013, p. 303) puts it forward their "linguistic idiosyncrasies". Many studies have focused on the problems of academic writers in different periphery contexts (e.g. Canagarajah, 2002; Cho, 2009; Li, 2006, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Salager-Meyer, 2008 to name just a few).

Another aspect of research publication is related to research design. Several studies have examined the viewpoints of journal editors and reviewers about non-Anglophone writers and found that the editors considered these writings as being unclear and problematic in terms of method, literature review, and result sections (Belcher, 2007; Gosden, 1992, 2003; Flowerdew, 1999, 2007). It has also been argued that non-native contributors fail to situate their work in the wider context of others' works in the literature review part. Some editors attributed this to the isolated situation of these writers which caused them to be unfamiliar with norms and requirements of research journals or rather, they seem to be unfamiliar with the norms of publishing research in international journals and the specific English competence needed for it. This can be related to the second objective of this study. Not being able to develop a well-organized research design or situate one's research in previous studies can be an issue related to instruction or, to put it in better words, some deficiencies in instruction. In other words, this may be related to the failure of a higher education system which trains writers who have not developed ERPP competence and, as a result, are not able to contribute their research to an international discourse community. These pedagogical concerns in developing ERPP competence in novice writers will be discussed more in the following section.

2.2. The ERPP pedagogy

Research on the application of theoretical studies in designing graduate curriculums, programs, syllabi, and courses with the purpose of helping non-native writers develop ERPP competence is a new direction in literature. Some studies have focused on the particular ERPP skills needed to publish successfully (e.g. Lee & Swales, 2006). One notable study is by Kwan (2010). She classifies the particular types of competences which are needed for research publication (what she calls a "discursive task") into two basic knowledge categories: communicating one's research through an RA and communicating with gate-keepers about the RA. As well as these categories, Kwan adds two additional strategic elements to her model including strategic research conception and strategic management of research and publishing. Table 1 demonstrates these categories in detail.

Table 1

Kwan's Model of the Discursive Task (*Taken from Kwan, 2010*)

Communicating one's research through an RA
Command of schematic structure of RA and its parts
Command of discipline specific citation language and metadiscourse
Command of generic writing skills (e.g. argumentation, coherence)
Communicating with gate-keepers about the RA
Command of occluded genres
Strategic research conception
Command of disciplinary academic rigor
Ability to find a "niche"
Ability to relate appropriately to the international community
Strategic management of research and publishing
Manage time cycle
Ensure required amount of publications
Know appropriate journals

Other studies, though not directly related to ERPP competences, have focused on the nature of what in general is called disciplinary writing expertise (DWE) (Dehghan, 2013; Flowerdew, 1999). Disciplinary writing expertise is the particular writing proficiency which is needed for writing academic texts (in general) in every discipline. According to these studies, DWE is composed of some knowledge subcategories, namely, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, and strategic or writing strategies knowledge. These knowledge areas, which are interrelated and interdependent, enable a member of a discourse community to demonstrate his/her knowledge in every particular discipline through different types of academic writings like theses, dissertations, research articles, book reports, etc.

Literature lacks evaluations of EFL postgraduate courses regarding the extent to which they are successful in training writers who are able to contribute their research to an international audience and to

have a determining role in the knowledge making process. Filling this gap will be the second main objective of this study.

3. Method

In order to answer the two research questions, this study was conducted in two phases. These two phases are explained separately as follows.

3.1. The First Phase

3.1.1. Context and Participants

The first, qualitative phase of this study aimed at exploring different types of problems that EFL scholars and postgraduate students face when trying to publish their research in international journals. The context of this phase of the study was Shiraz University, Iran. The participants were university professors (N=5) and MA. and Ph.D. students (N=11) of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The reason for choosing this group was that it is among few majors in Iranian universities whose students are required to write their theses, dissertations, and research articles in English. In other majors and disciplines, though the scholars and students may publish their research in English journals, they mostly write in Persian and have their articles translated into English for the purpose of publication.

3.1.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data collection of this study was implemented through observation, documentation of learners' writings and their interactions in the pair through CW tasks. After operationalization of the tasks and end of data collection, the independent interviews with the participants and their teachers were implemented by the researcher to inquiry their perception toward this new trend in English writing classes. To preserve findings from possible error, the researcher kept the interview far from a structured interview to make the interviewee feel free talking about their experience and ideas. After that, all of the gathered data were put together to be interpreted by the principles of qualitative research studies such as the one suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

3.2. The Second Phase

3.2.1. Instrument:

The second phase of this study involved a program evaluation procedure from the viewpoints of the two main stakeholders of graduate courses, i.e. university instructors and students. For this purpose, Kwan's (2010) model of discursive task as well as the findings of Dehghan (2013) on the nature of disciplinary writing expertise and factors influential in its development were utilized in order to develop an evaluation survey. Besides, information gathered from the interviews was also utilized to design a more comprehensive evaluation device. The survey was designed based on a Likert-type five-point scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much). Based on Kwan's (2010) model of ERPP and Dehghan's (2013) classification of the nature of DWE, 5 sections were selected and a number of items were developed for each section to examine the participants' evaluations of the degree to which they ranked their graduate programs on being successful in developing ERPP competences. These five ERPP competences included genre, discourse community, subject matter, rhetoric, and strategies related to research article (RA) publication. RA genre refers to the competence of how a research article is constructed structurally and

functionally and knowing the difference between RA and other academic genres (4 items). RA rhetoric refers to the knowledge of the purpose, and audience of the RA in academic contexts (2 items). Discourse community competence is knowledge of refers to knowledge of the goals and norms of the community to which the writers of RAs consider themselves to belong (2 items). Subject matter is the next category which is knowledge of the topic as well as critical thinking and discussion skills (2 items). Finally, RA publication strategies refer to how to find the right journal for their RAs and how to find about the norms and standards of these journals for publication (2 items). The items went through stages of drafting, reviewing by two TEFL experts, and rewording to ensure their linguistic accuracy and content intelligibility. The final survey with 12 items was used in the main phase of the study.

3.2.2. Participants and data collection

The participants of the study were M.A. and Ph.D. students (N= 83) in TEFL from 3 universities in Iran. The surveys were collected in regular classroom time or via email (in some cases).

3.2.3. Data Analysis

After collecting the surveys, the ratings were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For each participant, a mean was calculated to determine their positive or negative views about the efficacy of the TEFL postgraduate courses in preparing them for writing RAs regarding particular competences. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to analyze data collected.

4. Results

The findings of the first phase of the study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Problems EFL Writers Face in International Publications

No.	Problem	Frequency	percentage
1.	Bias	15	39.47
2.	Research problems	11	28.94
3.	Lack of familiarity with the norms and standards of publishing in international journals	7	18.42
4.	Writing proficiency problems	5	13.15

As the results in Table 2 indicate, bias is the most important problem mentioned by the participants in the interviews. Almost all of the interviewees maintained that, as credible international journals are mostly located in western or Anglophone countries, they are biased against research articles coming from non-Anglophone writers. More interestingly, the second problem which is mentioned by the participants is research-related shortcomings. Many of the participants believed that research articles written by EFL writers in the discipline lack many of the standards and norms of a good piece of research. From among these problems, the most important ones based on the salience attributed to them by the interviewees are as follows:

1. The topic not one tackling the borders of the field;
2. Lack of enough background knowledge on the topic (not studying enough literature about the topic); This may lead writers to replications or to topics which are not the state-of-the-art problems anymore;
3. Problems related to the research itself (stating the problems, research design, and statistics)
4. Problems related to the discussion part of the research articles (not being situated in the context of other research, not stating the particular outcomes of this research in tackling the niche, vague, too short)

For the other two problems mentioned by the participants, the frequencies show that the respondents do not regard lack of familiarity with the norms of international publication and English writing proficiency as important problems preventing the acceptance of their papers.

The second part of this study was examining the perceptions of Iranian EFL student writers about the efficiency of graduate programs in developing ERPP competences. As was mentioned, based on the literature and the qualitative results of the first phase of the study, a survey was constructed in order to gather data. This survey included 12 Likert scale items and 2 yes/no items followed by an open-ended question (see the Appendix). Table 3 presents the results of the first part of the survey. The table presents the percentage with which each of the choices on the Likert scale was chosen for each of the questions related to the 5 sections of ERPP. In addition, the last column was obtained based on the sum of *Very Much* and *Much* as *High*, *Average* as *Mid* and the sum of *Little* and *Very Little* as *Low* in order to gain a better basis for comparing the results.

Table 3.
The Percentages for the Five Sections of ERPP Competence (Students)

Section	Question No.	Very much %	Much %	Average %	Little %	Very little %	Level
RA genre	Q1	1.0	8.2	15.6	47.1	28.1	Low
	Q2	5.4	29.9	41.3	20.8	2.6	Mid
	Q3	0	6.3	15.3	53.2	25.2	Low
	Q4	10.2	38.9	41.8	6.2	2.9	High
RA rhetoric	Q5	1.3	10.8	41.8	31.7	14.4	Low
	Q6	0	9.2	18.7	39.9	32.2	Low
Discourse community	Q7	0	14.1	33.3	30.4	22.2	Low
	Q8	3.3	16.7	35.9	21.4	18.4	Low
Subject matter	Q9	0	3.3	25.4	48.4	22.9	Low
	Q10	1.6	17.4	31.1	20.2	29.7	Low
RA publication strategies	Q11	0	1.0	17.8	55.0	26.2	Low
	Q12	0	0	26.4	41.7	31.9	Low

As is evident from the results presented in Table 3 especially the last column, the students participating in this study evaluated their graduate programs as relatively weak in nearly all evaluation criteria considering the Level column which shows the tendency in the answers. The only exceptions are questions 2 and 4 from research article (RA) genre knowledge section. These two questions are about the students' familiarity with different genres in the discipline as well as their knowledge of citation language and metadiscourse of RAs. The students maintained that some of the courses in their studies, like

"research methodology" and "advanced writing", had been successful in familiarizing them with different genres and the way of writing an academic text in general (not necessarily RA genre).

The second part of the survey included two yes/no questions followed by an open-ended item:

Q13: Was your graduate program efficient in helping you become a research writer for credible international journals?

Q14: Do you consider yourself as a contributing member of the international community of TEFL who is able to help the knowledge construction process in the discipline? (or do you have the aim of becoming one in future?).

If yes, how do you evaluate your graduate studies in helping you to reach this understanding about your role in knowledge making process in the field?

Results showed that 69% of the participants responded negatively to the first question. In other words, they considered their graduate studies as having no role in helping them become research writers for an international audience. As for the second question, only 19 (22.8%) considered themselves as a researcher with concerns for making new knowledge in the field. From among these participants who answered positively to this question, only 3 (3.61% of the total) attributed this conceptualization of research and academic writing to their graduate program. Other participants attributed this to career-directed goals (promotion, continuing their studies, and a requirement for receiving their graduate degrees).

5. Discussion

This study was an attempt to examine the issue of international research publication in an EFL context from two aspects. The first was the problems that EFL writers face when they want to publish their research for an international audience. The results of the interviews identified four basic categories of problems the most important of which were bias and research-related problems. Regarding the first problem, nearly all of the respondents agreed that journals are biased against writings coming from non-Anglophone writers. One Ph.D. student,

Even if our papers are of good quality, they will be rejected by these journals.

Another M.A. student had a more pessimistic attitude about this problem,

I think they want to keep others out of their circles, which means that they are producers of knowledge and we are its consumers.

This view is in line with what has been mentioned by some as "center" and "periphery" (Canagarajah, 2002; Cho, 2009; Flowerdew, 2013; Li, 2006, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Salager-Meyer, 2008). According to this view, as international journals are located in center countries, they determine the rhetorical and discursive norms of writings with the aim of making periphery writers dependent on the knowledge produced by the center researchers and writers.

The second important problem mentioned by the participants is research-related shortcomings. They suggested a number of problems with research articles written by Iranian EFL writers which prevent them from being accepted and published in credible journals. From among the research-related problems, the most important ones are the newness of the topic, research design, and discussion parts. Regarding the topic, the respondents believed that one major reason for these papers not getting published is because they are not about the latest developments in the field, are not innovative, and do not fill the gaps or niches in the field. The other problem is about the design of the research including vague problems, lack of relationship between research variables and the procedures selected to manipulate and assess them, and short, incoherent, and vague discussion parts. Researchers are also not able to situate their research in the context of others' research. These findings also agree with previous research (Belcher, 2007; Dehghan,

2013; Flowerdew, 1999, 2007; Gosden, 1992, 2003). These problems are more related to lack of knowledge in the area of research as well as the subject matter. In other words, a researcher must become a competent scholar in a particular area before starting to research an aspect of it. However, lack of comprehensive knowledge in an area prevents the researcher to see the wider context in which this new piece of research must fit.

The other two problems mentioned by the interviewees were lack of familiarity with the norms and standards of these journals and deficits in the papers regarding English writing proficiency. The first problem can be argued to be related to the issue of instruction which will be discussed in the following part. Language proficiency was not mentioned by the respondents of this study as an important problem. It may be related to the fact that the students' major is TEFL and as a result, they do not feel any shortcomings regarding their language proficiency. Other research with other majors can provide more comparative information in this regard.

The second aim of the study evaluating the EFL student writers' perceptions regarding the efficiency of TEFL graduate program in developing ERPP competence. Based on the five criteria chosen to define ERPP, it was found that the students taking part in this study evaluated their graduate program as relatively weak. The only exception is genre knowledge which can be stated to have been acquired indirectly through exposure to research articles (e.g. they have to study published papers as the requirement of some of their courses) or as a result of receiving instruction on different genres in the field in some of their courses like "Research Methodology" and "Advanced Writing". For the other criteria of ERPP competence, the participants evaluated their graduate programs as being inefficient in helping them develop this particular knowledge. Training rhetors in the disciplines is one of the main objectives of all graduate courses worldwide though many will not reach this state (Beaufort, 2004). However, it seems that, from the point of view of students, this graduate program has not been successful in helping them reach this goal. These results are in line with other research which consider course requirements as the most important rhetorical purpose for which students write (Beaufort, 2004; Dehghan, 2013; Greene, 2001). As for the discourse community knowledge, these results are also in line with other research which confirmed that many graduate students consider classroom or their departments (rather than the international community) as the most important discourse community influencing their writing practices (Bazerman, 1997; Beaufort, 2004; Dehghan, 2013; Greene, 2001; Young & Leinhardt, 1998). These limited contexts have their own norms and goals. Observing these norms and goals was considered by many participants as the most important or even the only criterion in their writing performances. In short, it seems that this graduate program has not been efficient in helping graduate students expand their knowledge of discourse community from the immediate context where they study to include norms, goals, and culture of the broader, worldwide community.

Subject matter knowledge was another criterion selected for evaluating TEFL graduate program. Similarly, the respondents evaluated their graduate programs moderately weak in this regard. Answers to the questions 9 and 10 show that these students believe their courses do not provide them with necessary state-of-the-art knowledge on different topics as well as the gaps which must be filled with further research. Finally, the two publication strategies, i.e. knowing appropriate journals and knowing their publication norms and standards, were the last criteria for evaluating the graduate program. As the results of Table 3 indicate, the respondents regarded their graduate courses as not much helpful in giving them instructions in acquiring this strategic competence.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study showed that this group of EFL writers evaluated their position in the world of academic writing as an ignored and prejudiced against one. However, they also agreed that research written by EFL writers suffers from some research-related shortcomings. The second part of this study

which concerned an evaluation of EFL student writers' perceptions about the efficiency of TEFL graduate program in developing ERPP competences indicated that, from the point of view of graduate students, this program was not much helpful in developing ERPP in L2 writers. Regarding the TEFL program, the results showed that, though students were proficient in L2 writing, they did not think that their courses had a determining effect on making them international research writers (and contributors). Considering the role of RAs in today's knowledge making process, these results can be useful for graduate program instructors and course designers to consider the development of ERPP competence as an important aspect of their courses and programs. Considering the five subcategories of ERPP competence and the fact that just one of these subcategories is subject matter competence or knowledge about the topic, syllabus designers of graduate programs must pay special attention to developing all aspects of ERPP if the goal is to help these students become the future contributors of knowledge.

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Appendix A

How do you evaluate your graduate program in TEFL regarding its efficiency in

Question 1: making you familiar with the schematic structure of a research article (RA) and its parts?

Question 2: giving you enough instruction on different genres in the field like theses, dissertations, and research articles (RAs)?

Question 3: helping you learn different generic skills necessary for writing a RA, e.g. argumentation, coherence, organization, etc?

Question 4: instructing you specific citation language and other discursive practices which are used in research articles?

Question 5: making you recognize your role as a person who is responsible for adding to the existing knowledge by making new knowledge?

Question 6: making you recognize the international context of RAs and their purposes in sharing new knowledge?

Question 7: knowing how to relate appropriately with the international community?

Question 8: familiarizing you with the TEFL international community and its members?

Question 9: enabling you to find the niches (gaps) in the field?

Question 10: becoming competent in a particular topic in the field?

Question 11: finding appropriate journals to publish your research?

Question 12: finding the appropriate norms and standards of credible international journals?