

# A plea for objectivity in assessment of proficiency in scientific communication

By John R. Benfield

Soo Hwee Lim's commentary about the vague and increasingly more meaningless terms "native speaker" and "non-native speaker" of English is interesting and perhaps even provocative. I can express myself well, without foreign accent, in German (Austrian) – my "mother tongue", but I do better in English – the language I use daily for essentially all purposes. I am a "non-native" speaker of English who is more proficient in his second language than in his first. Therefore, if Lim is suggesting that we delete the terms "native-speaker" and "non-native speaker" as indicators of proficiency from our vocabulary, I entirely agree. We must, however, continue to acknowledge the message that these terms represent insofar as language is concerned. There are, and always will be, individuals who can express themselves easily and fully in the international language (now English) and others who cannot do so. Those people who can express themselves well are proficient, and those who cannot do so are less proficient to varying degrees. Acknowledgement and recognition of this fact, in a manner that is neither judgmental, nor prejudicial, is the first step toward increasing the number and quality of good medical

writers with "a good grasp of science" with an associated good grasp of the language of science.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could eliminate potentially inflammatory adjectives like "foreign" and "non-native" and adhere to measures of quality and proficiency? More than 50 years of experience with medical students and physicians in the U.S., and in other countries, have convinced me that there are students and physicians everywhere (including the U.S.) that remarkably lack proficiency in English. Indeed, there are colleagues in countries where English is not the language who are remarkably and admirably proficient in English. Thus, neither geography, nor birthplace is the issue.

How can one measure quality and proficiency, and who should be the professionals to do so? Educators in applied linguistics regularly evaluate proficiency with examinations, but these examinations may not (usually do not) truly reflect communication proficiency. In medicine (and probably in all disciplines) the level of communication proficiency is dependent in part on language skills and, at least in part, upon an understanding of the subject matter.

My conclusion is that the teaching and the development of good medical writers in English is the responsibility of professionals who are privileged to use English regularly [1]. This teaching requires joint efforts between educators in language and in medical specialties. The best available experts in both areas should develop examinations to evaluate communication skills (written and oral) objectively. Programs to improve proficiency in English as the International Language should be designed and implemented by educators in language and in medical specialties working together [2]. Publishers, and other funding sources, should recognize the enormous potential benefit of such programs and make it possible for the design and implementation to be done well and to be made widely available.

## John R. Benfield

David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA,  
Los Angeles, USA  
j.benfield@verizon.net

## References:

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2. Benfield JR, Feak CB, How authors can cope with the burden of English as an international language. *Chest* 2006;129:1728-1730

## A comment from David Graddol on Lim Soo Hwee's article

"Being a native speaker of English was never a guarantee of being a good writer. Now the very idea of a native speaker has become more problematic (the issue of monolingualism was probably as important as race). But just as the globalised world has created new generations of proficient multilingual English speakers, it has also created a need for new communication skills. Fifty years ago a skilled writer of English was writing mainly for native-speaking readers. Now a writer needs to be able to communicate clearly to a much wider, global audience.

So what kinds of skills and knowledge are needed by a science writer now? Is it possible that (some) multilingual speakers have skills which monolingual English writers don't?"

David Graddol  
david@english.co.uk