



Correlating English proficiency to international publication rates for Brazilian scientists

by Sonia M. R. Vasconcelos

When it comes to getting published in international journals, especially journals indexed by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), non-native English-speakers (NNES) appear to be at a disadvantage. This is the assumption made by some NNES in academia. How difficult it is for NNES scientists to produce a well-written research paper is, however, still an open question. Also, it is difficult to measure the time they spend writing up research, although such finding could reveal whether writing is one of the limiting steps for NNES in getting published. This question has intrigued me for some years, which led me to embark on a doctoral research project to address it. Before the project started I had designed a scientific writing course for researchers at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). This university was the first one to offer a writing course for the Brazilian scientific community. Scientific writing is not formally taught at graduate programmes in Brazil, and it has been great to offer novice and experienced researchers an opportunity to attend the classes, which I've taught for 4 years. On the one hand, the offering of such a course on campus may indicate that scientific writing training is not completely overlooked in Brazil. On the other hand, it shows that much has to be done at the national level. Indeed, academic writing policies at university are seriously lacking.

As in many countries, Brazilian scientific output is usually measured by using traditional science and technology indicators. This means that the 1.4% of the science published by Brazilians in ISI-indexed journals may be explained by the amount of research funding, number of international collaborations, and of active scientists. To me, understanding the scientific productivity of Brazilian authors in this "publish in English or perish" arena should also include looking at these authors' ability to write in English. My doctoral project is an attempt to understand the Brazilian scientometric scenario considering Brazil's linguistic scenario. The linguistic scenario includes a reading-oriented approach to English teaching and emanates from a major language project, the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) National Project [1], developed in the 1980s-1990s, which focused on reading and was of critical importance to TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in Brazil. Now, with an increasing demand for writing in academia it has left a gap to be filled. In such a linguistic scenario, we have academic programmes that offer reading courses for undergraduate and graduate researchers. However, in the particular case of the sciences, writing courses would be welcome. It is true that this is a long-term goal, as changes in teaching policies involve, among other factors, training professionals, which does take time. Nevertheless, the sooner Brazilian policy makers turn attention to this lan-

guage issue the sooner they will begin to study the possibilities of helping authors and potential authors.

Last year, when I presented the project [2,3], at the Doctoral Forum of the 10th International Conference of the International Society for Scientometrics and Informetrics, Sweden, I drew upon some editors' comments from a pilot survey conducted at the outset of the project. One of these editors mentioned "...of the papers that I handle in my office, which include all papers published from South, North, and Central America, at least 90% of papers written by non-English speaking authors require English revision (in addition to technical revisions), and at least 50% require substantial English revision." Some readers may argue that editors already have a biased approach to manuscripts submitted by NNES [4], causing that editor to report such a high rate. Biased reviews have recently been reported [4], but they certainly cannot account for the number of manuscripts required to undergo substantial English revision. As Alistair Wood reports in *Science Tribune* [5], "many articles are rejected because of inadequate command of English and nobody would expect a journal to publish an article which was full of grammatical mistakes in English." What I aim is to turn claims like Wood's into data in my country, to make possible a discussion of the extent to which language may be a hurdle for potential Brazilian authors in achieving visibility in academia.

Acknowledgements

I thank my advisors Drs. Jacqueline Leta and Martha Sorenson at the Education Program of the Medical Biochemistry Institute, UFRJ, for encouraging me to address this language issue.

Sonia M. R. Vasconcelos

teaches scientific writing through the Extension Coordination of the Health Sciences Center at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
sonia@peq.coppe.ufrj.br

References:

1. Celani, M A. A retrospective view of an ESP teacher education programme. *The ESPecialist* 1998;19.2:233-244
2. Vasconcelos, S. M. R.; Leta, J. Martha, S. Science in Brazil: A Scientometric and Linguistic Approach. Doctoral forum. In: 10th International Conference of the International Society for Scientometrics and Informetrics, 2005, Stockholm - Sweden. Proceedings of ISSI 2005. Stockholm, Sweden. Karolinska University Press, 2005. v. II. p. 726-726
3. Vasconcelos, S. M. R.; Martha, S.; Leta, J. English Proficiency and Time to Publication: The Case of Brazilian Science. In: 10th International Conference of the International Society for Scientometrics and Informetrics, 2005, Stockholm - Sweden. Proceedings of ISSI 2005. Stockholm, Sweden. Karolinska University Press, 2005. v. II. p. 664-666
4. Ross S J et al. Effect of Blinded Peer Review on Abstract Acceptance. *JAMA* April 12, 2006; 295(14):1675-80
5. Wood A. International scientific English: Some thoughts on science, language and ownership. *Science Tribune* April 1997. Available at <http://www.tribunes.com/tribune/art97/wooda.htm>