Thai University Academics' Challenges of Writing for Publication in English

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Abstract—This study examines challenges faced by Thai university lecturers with regards to publishing their academic works in English. 18 academics from two university settings in Thailand were involved in this investigation. The interviews were used to understand the lecturers' perceptions of the issues in writing for scholarly publication in the English language. Particularly, the aim of the research sought to discover what hindrances Thai university academics experienced and how they handled them. In addition, their needs for successful publishing were explored. The findings revealed three salient emerging themes, including (1) the need for publication in English; (2) difficulties in writing in English; and (3) the need for strenuous research support. The study suggests that university lecturers need more encouragement and support to publishing their academic works as a means of securing professional development, enhancing research culture and maintaining and increasing the national and international reputation of the university along with quality assurance.

Index Terms—Thai University Academics, challenges, writing for publication

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic publications are usually perceived as highly related to being' scholastic' or 'expert' of the researcher or university lecturer in the field concerned. Currently, the concept of 'publish or perish', which denotes the value of writing for publication, has greatly influenced academia all over including Thailand (Belcher, 2007). As a consequence, Thai university lecturers and researchers are under enormous pressure to publish in standard national or international journals or proceedings. As one of the main requirements of quality assurance, lecturers' academic work publication or dissemination accounts for important assessment outcomes for the research component (OHEC, 2014). The outcomes as such would then be used to evaluate the quality of Thai universities with regard to research capabilities and potential and given this it seems that the more academic publication there is, the more social prestige universities obtain. Moreover, in some university settings, publications have been found to be one of the criteria used for university lecturers' or researchers' yearly performance appraisal and salary adjustments (Belcher, ibid.)

Having an academic or research paper published is an intricate process for educators in all disciplines in general including Thai teachers of English who are both experienced and inexperienced (Cheung, 2010). In fact, writing for publication requires some fundamentals of English writing skills to make the outcome academically sound enough for possible inclusion in well-established journals (Moldovan, 2011). Therefore, a number of university lecturers regardless of their areas of specialty would encounter difficulties when writing their articles in English. Coates et al. (2002) add that the researcher's insufficient linguistic skills normally result in paper denial. Instead, it is to be noted that the English language witnessed remarkable changes and spread outside its inner circle (Kachru, 2005) to have new varieties of importance.

In addition to lacking required academic writing proficiency together with the hegemony of English, other issues such as the problems of defining research performance outcomes and the dilemma of publishing in local versus international journals, particularly when the priority is on mainstream international journals, should be given consideration as well. As English has become the major language for academic publishing in international journals, university lecturers and researchers have no exception but to publish in English in order to have wide representation and recognition.

This research pursues to investigate a delicate and critically overlooked research area in the Thai university context and to answer issues pertinent to the way university lecturers view writing for publication in English, factors that make writing for publication in English arduous, their perceptions of the importance of writing for publication in English and their needs for successful publishing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the academic world, adeptness in writing in English is increasingly regarded as an important component to prominence and more explicitly to getting research published in national and international journals and proceedings. The defiance faced by university researchers in writing for submission to English language journals is well documented and considered weighty. Not only is it just about writing academically acceptable, but it is also about keeping pace with the literature, conducting research in one language and writing up the results in another, choosing the right journal,

understanding meticulous journal and manuscript procedures, collaborating with editors, and interpreting reviewers' feedback, and possibly resubmitting the edited paper to the editor for final approval and finally getting official confirmation for the paper to be published.

English as a language for international communication

It is commonly held that as an international language, English, can support networking and exchange of ideas, as well as expertise among academics and professionals (Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008). Thus, in various institutes worldwide, publications in English have come to have higher status and establish a major criterion for promotion and for supporting scholars to apply for research grants (Canagarajah, 1996; Flowerdew, 1999; Yakhontova, 1997). Even though "publish or perish" is an adage in academic environments in spite of the language of publication (Salager-Meyer, 2013), writing for publication in English is noteworthy nowadays. It is considered necessary to progress of the profession (Driscoll & Driscoll, 2002). English has come to fore as the chief language of international scholarship and research and the central language of information and technology. To add to this, Huang (2010) indicates that the need for publication in English to gain acknowledgment in the international community is of great importance for scholars and that English-medium publications serve a platform for polyglot researchers to publicize their research broadly. In line with this, refereed journals published in English are often considered a requirement for rewards, tenure and promotion in universities in Asia (Cheung, 2010).

Difficulty in writing for publication in English

Evidently, English is the leading medium of international academic journals and publication and achievement in universities. However, academic writing in English is fundamentally demanding and challenging (Biber & Gary, 2010). Thus, many challenges are created for scholars in peripheral countries to write articles that can be published (Huang, 2010). These challenges can be categorized into two main types: discursive (language-related) and non-discursive (non-language-related) (Ferguson, 2011).

Discursive Challenges

For non-native English speakers, lack of English competence can make them fail to meet reviewers and editors' expectations (Curry & Lillis, 2010). In fact, some researchers identified several problems which make writing for publication in English difficult. Flowerdew (1999) observed that problems include lack of capability of expression; difficulty in ensuing from a discourse community, and longer time to write in English. Other challenges encompass lack of rich vocabulary, difficulty in making claims or structuring their arguments, L1 influence on the process of composition, problems in writing unified and well-structured paragraphs, synthesizing, and creating scholarly introductions and discussions, and ability in writing quantitatively rather than qualitatively (Okamura, 2006; Fahy, 2008).

Furthermore, there are some other complications reported in the literature such as use of citations; making reference to the available literature, use of hedges, intervention of different cultural views in connection with the nature of academic processes, low value of research, and absence of methodological thoroughness (Duszak and Lewkowicz, 2008; Mauranen, 1993).

In the Asian context, Al Fadda (2012) reported that the most frequently indicated difficulties in writing for publication in English by non-native speakers of English in China are procedural difficulties with English such as rhetorical patterning and genres, textual organization, innovative and different thinking, developing own voice, writers' block, and reporting the literature.

Non-discursive Challenges

In understanding the restrictions placed upon publishing in English, challenges of publishing which are not related to language need to be discussed. These, mainly elusive factors, can include plagiarism, emotional and psychological factors, motivation, grasping the culture of the reader for which an article is going to address, creating academic voice, the feelings of self-worth and aptitude attached to academic writing, lack of awareness and funding issues.

Other non-discursive challenges include lack of availability of resources, undependable communication means, deficiency of equipment and Internet access, lack of budget for specialized editorial staff, absence of training, lack of research and secretarial assistance, difficulties in dealing with editorial staff and assessors, dearth of financial sources, unreliable mailing services, and help from colleagues and supervisors (Canagarajah, 2002; Salager-Meyer, 2008).

Other challenges

Belcher (2007) argued that from the concept of 'peer reviews', off-network or peripheral non-native English speaking academics are likely to disregard the spectrum of constructive criticism owing to their foreignness with and exclusion from the English language publishing network. This can be seen in a form of "silencing" (Kramsch and Lam, 1999) causing publication attempting academics to keep quiet and feel reluctant to pursue the intent of publishing especially after receiving feedback from peer reviewing. This can then lead to the feelings of prejudice and publication opposition.

In the Thai context, studies to find out challenges of writing for publication in English faced by Thai university academics in EFL contexts are thus needed to shed light on the issues. Findings could then shed light on some guidance to help Thai researchers and practitioners to withstand the difficulties that they face in writing for publication in English.

III.   RESEARCH DESIGN

In view of the background and contextual description provided, this study sought to answer the following research questions:
• What are the university lectures' perceptions of publishing in English?
• What are their problems with publishing in English?
• What are their needs for successful publishing?

Participants in the study consisted of 18 university lecturers (15 female; 3 male) from two universities in Thailand. Ten of the participants worked at a private university while 8 others served at a public-run university. All participants have been university lecturers for more than 5 years and 4 of them have had experience publishing their papers in academic journals over the past 3 years. The interviews were designed to understand university lecturers' perceptions of the issues in writing for academic publication in English in Thailand. Specifically, the purpose of the interviews was to investigate what complications university lecturers in Thailand faced and how they handled such problems. In addition, the needs deemed necessary to publish their work successfully were investigated.

The participants were selected using the non-purposive sampling technique where the participants were investigated based on the judgment of the researcher. This enabled the researcher to target the participants according to the purpose of this study and knowledge of the population. Because of certain characteristics as teaching in higher education and having had to deal with academic publication in their career, the participants could be representative of the Thai university lecturers in Thailand. The two groups of participants working in private and public universities were also purposively divided so as to compare and contrast these two groups of lecturers' perceptions related to writing for publication in English.

As the researcher had a framework of themes to be explored, semi-structured interviews were used. The researcher first prepared an interview guide containing open-ended questions (See Appendix). During the interviews, the researcher tape-recorded the interviews and later transcribed the tapes for content analysis. This method was adopted to allow discussions to diverge from the interview guide and new ideas could be brought up during the interviews.

It was found that the use of semi-structured interviews made it possible for the researcher to prepare questions ahead of time. It also allowed the researcher to be prepared and appear competent during the interviews. At the same time, the participants had freedom to express their views in their own terms.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings pertaining to three salient themes include:

The need for publication in English

All of the participants agreed that publication in English can help convey ideas to international readers as English is now a language for international communication. Several also pointed out that from 2015 onwards English will be used as the official language for business for AEC (ASEAN Economic Community), raising the importance of English throughout Asia. Specifically, those from the public university added that they are facing pressure from government authorities requiring them to have publication in English while the private university lecturers pointed out they are required by their university to publish in English for quality assurance purposes. Finding a job and/or getting promoted are the other reasons that some of the participants referred to.

These responses support the idea that Thai university lecturers recognize the importance of learning English as a language of global communication. In fact, some research has pointed to the prominence of English as an international language for research. For example, Duszak and Lewkowicz (2008) have identified that the use of English could enable scholarly communication among university researchers and on top support their professional development. It is a relevant fact that the hegemony of English as a lingua franca has significant consequences for research and academic writing by university faculties in both expanding and outer circles (Kachru and Nelson, 2006).

Difficulties in writing in English

Discursive Analysis

The analysis from the interview showed that most respondents have indicated grammar, research-related discussion, lack of tecinical vocabulary, sentence formation and writing styles as linguistic challenges for writing intellectually in English. This finding is in line with the previous research in the field (Al Fadda, 2012; Flowerdew, 1999) which reported the linguistic challenges that non-native English teachers face when writing for publication in English. Insufficiency of proficiency in Standard English as well as mastery of research-related protocol can be considered as a key obstacle for Thai university lecturers wishing to publish in English. However, a few participants with academic background in the field of EFL and Linguistics reported no discursive complication in their attempt in publish work in English.

Non-Discursive Analysis

The non-discursive feature includes concerns over non-linguistic areas in writing for publication in English. The areas identified by most respondents as non-language related issues in publication writing included poor critical and analytical skills, inadequate sources, restricted access to dependable sources, bias toward non-native English authors, managerial duties, lack of university support, lack of suitable laboratories, and unsatisfactory research skills. Also, the participants specified heavy teaching load, non-existence of research communities and interest group, dearth of research funds, difficulty in accessing proper publishers, some reviewers' unfavorable feedback as well as difficulty in choosing

publishable research topics as non-language related impediments to writing in English. By and large, most respondents' responses to non-discursive challenges were quite similar, enabling the possibility of generalizing the results among the participants to some extent. Interestingly, it appears that the lecturers' research involvement was influenced by a dynamic interaction between internal and external factors. The lecturers each valued research differently. Time constraints and limited research funding and support were major factors affecting their research involvement. Thus, it could be said that the lecturers' research culture was not well-developed and that might explain the lecturers' low research outcomes in terms of quantity and quality. The study also revealed that the status of the Thai lecturers' research culture was negatively impacted by priorities in the wider global research context. According to Canagarajah (2002), non-discursive conventions and requirements of academic publishing can serve specific functions which discard Third World scholars from the academic publication process.

The need for research support

Most respondents addressed an important role of Thai higher education institutions in encouraging Thai university lecturers to be more involved in research domains and activities. More than half of the respondents believed that Thai universities can contribute in supporting research oriented functions by conducting training and workshops by expert researchers as well as an English writing center or lab for language editing support. Several respondents indicated that receiving appropriate individual guidance in writing and attending relevant writing workshops would be beneficial while a few suggested that receiving support in searching for appropriate research topics that work within the context of Thailand could be an initial step to minimize difficulties they experience when writing in English. It was added that a reduction of teaching load, research grants, incentives and rewards for university lecturers should be provided systematically and substantially with the linking of performance appraisal with research. Martin (2000) stated that the governments and universities' initiatives on research funding and support are relatively insignificant within the wider context of potential means of allocating funds. Administrative decision remains a prevailing force, amplified by peer review and institution-level performance-based allocation. Thus, in the Thai context, it would seem that Thai universities need to take serious steps to ensure that research is placed as a top urgency in their strategic plans and personnel professional development programs.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dominance of English in international research is a linguistic occurrence which has notable insinuation for teachers and researchers aspiring to publish in standard journals in English. This has made writing scholarly articles for publication in English become increasingly necessary. In particular, the current situation presents a formidable challenge for the Thai university lecturers trying to publish in English.

The accounts of language-related and non-language related challenges reported by the participants in study who are Thai university lecturers reveal how hard it is to tackle the current condition and maintain a balance between and doing research work and teaching. For the language related barriers, it appears to be common problems for non-native speakers of English as writing challenges include vocabulary, grammar, discourse organization and tone. As for the non-linguistic barriers, time constraints and limited research funding and support are main purported reasons deterring their research participation and interest.

To increase the chances of academic publications in certified and accredited journals, Thai university lecturers may adopt some strategic plans with university support. Universities can establish academic writing programs for lecturers to promote their professional development, including fostering the understanding of research writing conventions, informing lecturers of clear standards for academic publication in English, and developing plans for lecturers based on their specific needs in writing.

University support for research is thus imperative. To assure quality in research, Thai universities should also focus on creating forums which could be in the form of conferences, workshops, and seminars where faculty members can appropriately discuss, share, and inquire about ideas with other associated researchers. Besides, university lecturers, universities, the Thai government, and policymakers concerned need to take more responsibility in developing an effective research culture due to its significance in the global economy.

At a personal level, Thai university lecturers on the whole dissimilarly perceive the importance of research and writing for publication. However, the bottom line is that they need to have own inspiration to conduct research of their interest. Otherwise, publishing academic works would always be seen as a burden, not a boon per se. What they should have first and foremost is the desire to step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their standpoints, and make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge.

APPENDIX.   SAMPLE OF THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Would you please tell me about your background as a university lecturer?
2. Do you teach at a private or public university?
3. What are the differences between public and private universities in Thailand?
4. What do you like most and least about your job?
5. What are the main requirements of your job?

6. Do you require to do research on the job?

7. What kind of research support do you get?

8. Do you publish regularly in journals or proceedings? What language do/will you use for publication?

9. What do you think about publishing your work in English? How hard is it?

10. What problems do you have when trying to publish your work in English? How do you deal with them?

11. What kind of support do you need from your university to publish successfully?

12. Overall, what does it take for you to write for publication in English?

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