DOI 10.36145/DoC2020.11

Kristīne **Užule**

Transport and Telecommunication Institute, Riga, Latvia

uzule.k@tsi.lv

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2633-6069

Why Writing in English Might Be Problematic for Eastern and Central European Scholars

Undoubtedly, today English is the lingua franca of international academia, which is why many scholars publish their work in English even if they have an opportunity to do so in their native languages (Lopez-Navarro et al., 2015). One reason why academic and research staff tend to publish their work in English is to reach a wider scientific audience (Lopez-Navarro et al., 2015). Another reason might relate to national and institutional policies. For example, in 2012 the Latvian Council of Science passed a decision on the classification of scientific publications and highlighted the importance of publications in journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIH, INT1 and INT2. On their web-site the Ministry of Sciences and Education of the Republic of Latvia has published a report of Technopolis Group on the Methodology of International Evaluation of Scientific Institution

Activity in Latvia[1]. The report claims that the bibliometric analysis includes the collection of papers that higher education institutions have published in journals identified in Scopus and Web of Science. This entails that the quality of universities and their staff is rated considering publications in indexed journals. Some higher education establishments encourage publications not only in these databases but also those with a higher impact factor of a journal.

However, for many scholars, English is a foreign language and this factor limits the level of their proficiency in English. Because of individual differences and variations in micro-level economic and educational contexts, the English writing skills of academics from Central and Eastern Europe can be diverse. What is more, the quality of English writing skills for each writer might vary across his/her life span because the level of command will depend on how frequently the scholar is exposed to and employs English. Also, the presence of native speakers in the environment in which an individual works and writes in English, will affect the level of English language proficiency. This paper outlines some aspects which makes writing in English for publication purposes challenging for those who are not immersed in the native English speaking environment.

Language is a product of a particular civilization and of a particular nation. It is a historical, cultural and experiential heritage of a particular group of people, which serves the group as a tool connecting a complex network of operations at the functional, emotional, cognitive and social levels and which is used by individuals to become and remain members of a variety of social groupings. The complexity and flexibility of that network, determined by the complexity of the structure of the group, requires

1. https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/zinatnisko-instituciju-starptautiskais-izvertejums. Document "2019. gada zinātnisko institūciju starptautiskā novērtējuma metodoloģija (apstiprināta ar 2019. gada 4. decembra IZM rīkojumu Nr. 1-2e/19/344)".

individuals to develop the ability to continuously adjust to changes in that network. Most native speakers can do so without considerable efforts.

In contrast, all non-native speakers are subject to language acquisition constraints associated with how the human brain develops and functions. This claim can be supported by the comparisons of the outcomes of language learning between native and foreign languages. For example, Andringa and Dabrowska (2019) notice that speakers of a native language eventually converge on one set of grammatical structures that are considered correct and they continue to produce them throughout their lives; in contrast, non-native speakers produce a wide variety of sets of grammatical structures that are often awkward or ungrammatical. They attribute this difference to the biological constraints of the critical period of the development of the brain. Patricia Kuhl, a renowned scientist in early child language acquisition, refers to the critical period as a window of opportunities for language learning, which is constrained by time and experience (Kuhl, 2011). Generally, the critical period is defined as the period after which attaining native-like proficiency is extremely difficult, if possible at all; the exact age might be somewhat different because it is conditioned by individual differences. Generally, if a learner started to learn a foreign language after the age of 10, attaining native-like proficiency is extremely difficult (Trafton, 2018). But even if the onset of the foreign language learning was prior to the age of 10, but the language that was heard was marked by errors, lack of fluency and transfers from other languages, is the acquired language going to be the same as that of a learner acquiring the language in the native language environment? Obviously, not. In any case, research shows that the brain of late L2 learners, in other words, those who studied L2 after the critical period closed, processes syntactic structures differently from native speakers (Mickan, & Lemhofer, 2020). Apart from the critical period constraints, Hopp et al. (2019) claim that

the insufficiency of the foreign language input significantly impedes the development of higher levels of language proficiency in a foreign language, which is why they transfer structures of L1, particularly grammatical structures, to their L2 utterances. Psycholinguistic research of cross-linguistic priming, also known as studies examining the effects of one language on the encoding of another language in a bilingual brain, has been confirmed across many languages and has shown that the age at which the foreign language was acquired and the proficiency levels affect the quality of knowledge of that foreign language, in other words, L1 structures impact the production of L2 structures (Salamoura, & Williams, 2006). However, if the L2 is acquired early in life and a speaker has attained a relatively high proficiency level, L2 might affect the production of L1 structures, too (Hohenstein et al., 2006).

Thus, attaining a high proficiency level that is associated with academic writing in English might be challenging due to contextual and biological reasons and might require the continuous investment of different resources. First, English learning requires financial resources to afford continuous learning. It is important to understand that if learning or practice stops, the quality of the acquired language might start to decline because of biological factors. Second, individuals should allocate time to the continuous study of the English language, which might result in restricting participation in some other activities, both for professional purposes and leisure. Specifically, pursuing English language learning might prevent people from participating in a project or taking another part-time job, which requires time and which, for example, in Latvia, are common place for teachers and lecturers in the educational sector. Third, individuals need to create the environment of sufficient, diverse, continuous and good quality English language input which should include individual training sessions, travelling, working and studying in an English-speaking country.

I think that in the context of Eastern Europe the greatest challenge of the factors mentioned above might be gaining access to native English speakers, particularly professional teachers of English, who can formulate a linguistic problem, answer a linguistic question, justify a response and offer support in learning. Being a resident of Latvia, I have always lacked communication with native English speakers. During the course of my career in Latvia spanning over the period of 12 years, I have been employed by six Latvian universities and I have worked in the programs of business and management, logistics, teacher training, translation and Slavic languages and literatures. I cannot remember a single case of a native English speaker being a member of faculty. Occasionally native English speakers join faculties, but mostly in the capacity of visiting lecturers, which means that their presence is short-term, and therefore not significant for ameliorating and sustaining the English language knowledge of locals. In Latvia, native English speakers outside academia are a rare phenomenon, too, mostly for the relatively low level of average salaries and the small size of the economy, which limits their opportunities. I think that most Latvians experience native English speech when travelling for business and leisure to English-speaking countries, however, even there their access to good quality continuous input of English might be limited and insufficient for learning purposes. Specifically, when people are on a business trip, business partners are hardly expected to correct and explain their grammatical and lexical mistakes. When being tourists, people are mostly immersed in the culture but not so much in the language environment that is sufficient for practicing English and even more so with regards to formal aspects of language which would include academic writing. Thus, finding a native English context that can boost learning of the language, especially of the formal style, at least for Latvians in Latvia, is a challenge. Mostly Latvians are immersed in the

context of the Latvian variety of English, which has flaws if compared to native English standards and which is the result of the lack of the native English language exposure. Sulpizio et al. (2020) claim that languages that a bilingual knows compete for selection, and when there is a cross-linguistic conflict between structures, the ones that belong to a dominant language often win. As was mentioned earlier, psycholinguistic research into monolingual and bilingual language production proves that speakers tend to reuse structures previously heard or produced when encoding a particular utterance, even cross-linguistically from one language to another (Salamoura, & Williams, 2006).

Kuhl (2011) argues that social factors underline language learning. This explains why the lack of regular and sufficient interaction with native speakers or those proficient in a foreign language impedes foreign language acquisition. Consequently, merely attending English classes as part of the school curriculum might not suffice for developing skills required for fluent oral and written communication. Learning academic writing in English through reading and watching videos might have limitations because learners of English need to produce various samples of writing, which would then be corrected and commented on; otherwise, learners will not know their writing weaknesses and will not be able to improve on them. However, in Latvia, for example, writing letters, articles, reports, essays and academic papers in English tends to be the least developed skill not only at schools but also at universities because it is highly time-consuming for course instructors and might require more lecturers, which will increase the costs of programs, which educational institutions might have difficulty to accept. Therefore, when writing samples are occasionally produced, they tend to be short and often informal. The focus of corrections is mostly on the identification of grammatical and lexical errors. However, writing for academic purposes is much more than producing a correct grammatical structure and

choosing a word that seems to fit the context. It includes the expression of ideas in a logical and organized manner by selecting convincing arguments to support ideas, and conveying them in a disciplinary sanctioned rhetorical style that tap into nuances of meaning. It also includes the development of the writer's unique style and voice. This is why pre-sessional programs in the UK, among other things, focus on the development of writing and research skills. Students produce various samples of writing, which are corrected, commented on and discussed.

One consequence of the lack of both language proficiency and experience in writing in English is that academic and research staff commission a translation of their papers. Nonetheless, the quality of the translation, including nuances of meaning and the uniqueness of the expression of the original writer's voice, usually demonstrates inconsistencies between their original paper written in their native language and its English translation, to the point that the initial writer's intention is lost. Acknowledging the critical role of identity in the process of L2 writing, Ivanič and Camp (2001) promote the idea that the writer's voice points to the cultural and historical heritage of the author, which is why it should be preserved. In his handbook on academic writing for international students Bailey (2011, p. 150) writes that "there is no one correct style of academic writing, and students should aim to develop their own "voice". According to Gillett et al. (2009), the writer's voice is a feature of academic writing, which includes the nuances of expression, the manner of advancement of own arguments and the approach to separating own voice from that of other authors. This suggests that the originality of the writer's voice should prevail, which on occasion might be incompatible with the native English writing tradition.

Obviously, an academic text whose linguistic quality impedes understanding of the content is unacceptable. However, if a text has some imperfections in lexical choice, style, grammar, which do not

hinder understanding, perhaps it should be considered for publication because these imperfections point to the uniqueness of the writer's voice constituted by his/her first language and culture as well as the acceptance of the diversity of writing contexts and constraints. In fact, the concept of World Englishes, which was coined and developed by Braj Kachru in his book "The Other Tongue" (1992), argues in favor of the preservation of unique local identity and linguistic features that do not match the standards of native English varieties as long as the intended meaning is conveyed.

Another factor that perhaps argues for the linguistic flexibility of Academic English as produced by non-native speakers is the absence of an English Language Institute which would be able to prescribe, describe and educate on the official norms for publications in English in formal, professional and scientific contexts. In other words, there is a lack of one authority that could clearly delineate the rules of writing in English for specific professional purposes worldwide. This contrasts with the standardized writing norms established for some native languages, for example, in Latvia there is a Latvian Language Institute, which performs exactly these functions. The lack of such an English language institution means that there is a pluralism of norms and therefore making judgements on the quality of the received writing, which does not impede understanding of a message, might be based on subjective interpretations and perceptions of the text, which contrasts with the very idea of science, whose aim is to yield objective, not subjective, insights and solutions.

As for the European Union policies, in 2018 the Council of European Union published Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, which identified a multilingual competence as one of the key competences of lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2018). This competence is defined as the ability to produce,

understand and adequately interpret oral and written communications in other languages consistently with how they are comprehended and intended by their native speakers. Obviously, this definition taps into the proficiency levels that ensure productive communication and professional undertaking in the languages. However, the exact level of the command of the foreign language is not indicated, despite the existence of the European foreign language portfolio, and this entails that the native-like proficiency expected in publications might not be the only criterion for acceptance. The same Recommendations promote respect for minority languages. The concept of respect, obviously, might be defined very differently, but one plausible interpretation might relate to creating and offering more opportunities for minority languages in professional contexts. Overall, in science and academia, local languages, particularly of small nations, such as Latvia, which do not have a very large collection of diverse academic and scientific resources available, might be labeled as minority languages within the European Union context. Within this perspective, English dominance in scientific publications should be counterbalanced by a greater amount and diversity of scientific literature written in local languages.

The dominance of English in science might have negative effects not only on local scholars writing in English but also on the collection of academic and scientific literature published in local languages. The possible outcome is the decrease in the number and diversity of academic and scientific literature available in local languages which would impede students' acquisition of more advanced knowledge in their native languages. Latvia is one such example. For instance, one of the most recent psychology textbooks written in Latvian was published in 2015. No wonder that academic staff is often compelled to assign reading homework in English, not in Latvian, because the necessary resources are simply unavailable in Latvian. Yet another potentially negative

effect of the lack of academic and scientific literature published in a local language, for example in Latvian, relates to the perceived value of that local language. If the availability of academic and scientific literature in this language is restricted, is this language a truly valuable commodity in education and science even in its own country?

As for my personal experience with languages, I have completed my post-doctoral education, Ph.D. and Master's degrees in the UK and USA, respectively. When immersed in those environments, not only did I fully accept their traditions and norms, I was delighted to explore and be part of them. However, I have been outside the native English language environment for the last 10 years, with the exception of a few weeks or months spent in the south of England in the past few summers. Despite this, I feel that the quality of my English has declined, though not as much as that of my Polish, which I can still understand but can hardly produce. I completed my undergraduate degree in Lodz. I was fluent then, but after graduation I relocated to the USA. Since then I have hardly had any opportunity or stimulus to sustain my knowledge of Polish, and the outcome is an inability to communicate in the language. This is consistent with Sulpizio et al. (2020, p. 2), who write that "L2 knowledge can dramatically change throughout lifespan depending on personal experience".

Obviously, there are no easy solutions for individuals writing in English who are not native speakers and who do not pursue their careers in English-speaking environments. However, the status of English as a global language and the idea of World Englishes seem to imply a higher degree of democratization of attainability standards of professional communication in English, including scientific writing, which stems from the need to accept the diversity of contexts which English has permeated. Under such circumstances there might be a productive coexistence of English as a local variety and local languages,

particularly, if publications in local languages are encouraged, which should be the case because of the multilingual and multicultural diversity promoted by the European Union. Finally, a factor encouraging reconsideration of the applied value of English might relate to Brexit because this phenomenon might be interpreted as an attempt by the United Kingdom to separate itself from the immersion into European cultural and linguistic diversity. In fact, in recent years more and more of my students have been requesting to introduce more English materials produced by European countries other than the UK. Obviously, these materials tap into the culture-specific perceptions and have their own linguistic features of English, which sometimes might be different from what might be expected within British cultural and linguistic norms.

References

Andringa, S., & Dabrowska, E. (2019). Individual differences in first and second language ultimate attainment and their causes. *Language Learning*, 69(S1), 5–12. doi:10.1111/lang.12328.

Bailey, S. (2011). *Academic writing. A handbook for international students* (3rd ed.) (p. 150). New York: Routledge.

Council of the European Union (2018). *Council Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. Official Journal of the European Union*, C189(01). Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN. Accessed on 11 May 2020.

Gillett, A., Hammond, A., & Martala, M. (2009). *Successful academic writing*. New York: Pearson/Longman

Hohenstein, J., Eisenberg, A., & Naigles, L. (2006). Is he floating across or crossing afloat? Cross-influence of L1 and L2 in Spanish-English bilingual adults. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 9(3), 249–261. doi:10.1017/S1366728906002616.

Hopp, H., Steinlen, A., Schelletter, C., & Piske, T. (2019). Syntactic development in early foreign language learning: Effects of L1 transfer, input, and individual factors. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *40*(5), 1241–1267. doi:10.1017/S0142716419000249.

Ivanič, R., & Camp, D. (2001). I am how I sound: Voice as self-representation in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *10*(1/2), 3–33.

Kachru, B.B. (1992). *The other tongue: English across cultures*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Kuhl, P.K. (2011). Brain mechanisms underlying the critical period for language: Linking theory and practice. *Human Neuroplasticity and Education*, 117, 33–59.

Lopez-Navarro, I., Moreno, A.I., Quintanilla, M.A., & Rey-Rocha, J. (2015). Why do I publish research articles in English instead of my own language? Differences in Spanish researchers' motivations across scientific domains. *Scientometrics*, 103, 939–976. doi:10.1007/s11192-015-1570-1.

Mickan, A., & Lemhofer, K. (2020). Tracking syntactic conflict between languages over the course of L2 acquisition: A cross-sectional even-related potential study. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, *32*(5), 822–846. doi:10.1162/jocn_a_01528.

Salamoura, A., & Williams, J.N. (2006). Lexical activation of cross-language syntactic priming. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, *9*(3), 299–307. doi:10.1017/S1366728906002641.

Sulpizio, S., Del Maschio, N., Del Mauro, G., Fedeli, D., & Abutalebi, J. (2020). Bilingualism as a gradient measure modulates functional connectivity of language and control networks. *NeuroImage*, 205, 116306. doi:10.1016/j.neuroimage.2019.116306

Trafton, A. (2018). Cognitive scientists define critical period for learning language. *MIT News*. Retrieved from http://news.mit.edu/2018/cognitive-scientists-define-critical-period-learning-language-0501. Accessed 14 May 2020.