Publishing papers: The people and the process

Theron Muller

*Noah Learning Center*

**Reference data:**

This discussion on getting MA papers published was participant driven and involved 30 minutes of small group discussion and 30 minutes of summarizing and commenting on the small group discussions. Several themes emerged regarding the systems and staff of journals, advice on where unpublished authors can start, dealing with rejection, strategies for juggling more than one article at a time, and opportunities to get involved as publications staff. This article is a summary of the various topics discussed during this discussion format presentation at JALT2005.

Increasingly, teachers are pursuing post-graduate qualifications, such as MAs and PhDs, and as part of their studies these teacher/researcher/students are producing a large volume of high-quality, carefully researched material. It seems a shame that many of these papers are only read by their authors and markers. Thus this discussion at JALT2005 was intended as a venue for participants to share their stories and seek advice about getting academically published.

Additionally and increasingly, universities are making hiring decisions based on an applicant’s publications. One participant described how, after being hired at a university part-time, he was contacted with a request for “a list of your publications.” While the story worked out in the end, the experience inspired him to attend the presentation and learn how improve his résumé for the future. Another participant saw publication credits as a stepping stone from part-time to full-time positions.
The discussion was divided into two parts. The first was small group discussion, and the second involved whole group discussion and a summary of the small group topics. The small group discussions were recorded using digital voice recorders, as was the whole group discussion and summary. On reviewing the audio recordings, several themes emerge, which are highlighted in Table 1.

The following sections will summarize the discussion of the themes introduced in Table 1 in more detail.

### The systems and staff of journals

The majority of journals are comprised of all-volunteer staff. This means their editors, reviewers, and editorial boards are fellow teachers. As such, they are interested in well-written articles which exhibit originality and careful research. There is generally an unofficial hierarchy of importance assigned to different journals, which employers may take into account when hiring (Braine, 1998). This hierarchy is illustrated in Table 2.

I am reluctant to include the table because it may imply one publication is better than another, but it was part of the discussion at JALT2005. Please remember that the hierarchy isn’t intended to distinguish between different levels of quality. Regional publications often publish very high quality, region-specific papers, and international publications can and do publish papers of questionable usefulness to the field. Instead, it is better to think of the table as illustrating differences in production capacity.

Internationally edited volumes of papers are relatively rare, and therefore have the lowest capacity of the group, meaning they can accommodate the fewest authors. On the other
One suggestion for verifying the quality of a publication was to check whether it has an ISSN. Publications with ISSNs may be considered to be more legitimate than those without.

### Table 2. A hierarchy of publications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refereed Publications</td>
<td>Book publication with an international publisher</td>
<td>An edited volume of research papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International journal</td>
<td>ELT Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National print journal</td>
<td>TLT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Journal</td>
<td>Asian EFL Journal (AEJ)</td>
<td>There are comparably more of these journals than print publications, so they can publish even more articles. Be careful that the journal is refereed; i.e., has an editorial board and anonymous reviewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Online Journal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizations like the British Council are constantly advancing TEFL as a profession, and part of this involves sponsoring new journals. However, be careful to check that these publications are refereed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-refereed publications</td>
<td>Doesn’t involve anonymous peer reviewing</td>
<td>Book reviews, many university publications (Kios)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

hand, internet publications have a relatively large capacity, and can therefore publish more papers. Thus a well-written and researched paper is more likely to be accepted by an internet publication than a print publication. This is a product of the different mediums and not a product of the papers they publish.

One participant stressed it was important to realize that publication credits aren’t mystical. Since his background was journalism, he considered it natural to be published. That said, after looking over Table 2 many unpublished authors will assume the natural place to start is from the bottom, and will look to the book reviews section of *TLT* or *AEJ*. Many of the participants in the discussion agreed this was a good place to start. Additional suggestions are summarized below:

- Authors may want to start with a “canned English” article which explains some teaching technique or methodology that works for the author. Such articles are highly structured, and are therefore more approachable to authors with little experience.
- Collaborate with another author, although one participant cautioned that employers may not
weigh coauthored articles as heavily as articles which have a sole author.

- Look to smaller publications, such as SIG publications, to start.
- Try to build a personal relationship with the editor that goes beyond typical rote correspondence—many editors will appreciate the effort. This opinion is also supported by Rentz (2005).
- Watch out for special issues which cover a particular topic of interest to you and your specialty.
- Some start-up journals are more willing to work with authors in order to prime their first issues.
- Turn effective presentations you have done into papers.
- Do action research—Share innovative teaching ideas or techniques which have improved your classroom, and which you’ve researched.

While the above suggestions may be good places to start, please remember refereed publications conduct anonymous reviews, and therefore a non-refereed publication, such as a book review, will only help an author insofar as it improves writing style and organization; when submitting a research paper, previous publications don’t count as far as that paper and its reviewer are concerned.

If you have a completed paper, perhaps something written for an MA, another option is to query the editor of a potential publication, asking if they are interested in the topic. Editors who reply to such queries may be more inclined to work with you through the revision and publication process. Editors who don’t reply may not be editors you want to work with toward your first publication. In fact, journal editors themselves have said they prefer to view the publication process as a collaborative effort (Rentz, 2005, p. 293), and at the discussion, John Adamson, who is part of the editorial team at both AEJ and Asian Business Journal, encouraged participants to query editors regarding potential articles.

Additionally, JALT offers a peer support group, which is an opportunity to get free advice about a paper from fellow professionals. For contact information, please see Table 3.

**Dealing with rejection**

The consensus at the discussion was that all authors face rejection, and that very rarely are manuscripts accepted in their original form. In fact, some participants weren’t even interested in this topic for small-group discussion since they were already used to accommodating rejection. According to Rentz (2005, p. 293), editors are interested in making good articles great, so being offered a chance to revise a manuscript is something authors should look forward to as a chance to increase the significance of their contribution to the field (Rentz, 2005, p. 294).

Rentz (2005) goes on to note that,

> As a rule, editors “try to create the most supportive environment [they] can for authors, helping them work through reviewer comments to arrive at a publishable manuscript that pleases both authors and reviewers, and that satisfies the intellectual demands of the community.” (p. 294)
Rentz’ view is one that dovetails nicely with the discussion. Authors should assume revisions will be necessary, and that those revisions will “take one’s work to a higher level than one could ever have reached by oneself.” (Rent, 2005, p. 294)

Hopefully your reviewer comments are instructive (they usually are), and you can use them as a tool to bolster your paper, then send it to another publication, which will offer a fresh start. Editors and reviewers even go so far as to consider articles that aren’t resubmitted “a waste of time and effort” (Braine, 1998, p. 5).

Another concern was the amount of time the publication process takes. One participant mentioned that a rejection took six months, another that publication took two years. Braine (1998, p. 6) mentions an article which took four years from conception to publication. For authors trying to meet review committee deadlines, choice of journals may be critical. There are some additional suggestions in the section titled, “Building several papers from the same research” below. However, it’s important to remember simultaneous submissions, sending the same paper to more than one publication, are unacceptable.

Transforming an academic paper for publication
Many participants were interested in adapting papers from academic coursework. Several useful comments included:

- Change the paper’s voice to match the publication, and change the paper to look like an article published in the journal.
- Consider situations where a cross-disciplinary article might be of interest, particularly in bridging specialties.
- Avoid university publications, as most are non-refereed.
- In most cases you will have to reduce the word count and narrow your references.
- Make sure to match the journal’s formatting standards. One participant recommended EndNote (<www.endnote.com>) as a useful tool for organizing references.

It was also mentioned that full dissertations are published by AEJ. Advantages of publishing a dissertation include gaining access to a larger audience and the chance to write a forward which could count an additional publication.

Building several papers from the same research
Simultaneous submissions, or sending the same paper to two publications, are unacceptable. Much of a publication’s time goes into reviewing and suggesting revisions to papers, so having papers that editors and reviewers have been working on pulled by the authors just prior to publication is too costly. Particularly since journals are comprised of all volunteer staff, publications are careful to make sure staff time is spent productively, and working on papers which will be published elsewhere isn’t productive.
That said, a good deal of time and thought goes into a particular research design, and it seems a shame to only publish one paper after so much work. One way to get several publications from the same research is to write with several different angles in mind. For example, when conducting research into student attitudes, it may be possible to write one paper about the results of the study, another about the process of organizing the study (how was institutional and faculty support arranged?), another about the measure design (test, questionnaire, or something else? How did you verify its effectiveness and refine it?), and still another about the process of growth experienced as you went through the design, implementation, and publication process. These are just some possibilities, and each is a unique paper unto itself. Thus while simultaneous submissions are unacceptable, different papers based on the same research process are practical.

Please take note, however, of Braine’s (1998) advice regarding generating multiple papers from the same research, if more than one manuscript is generated from the same, usually large-scale project, the author should make note of the other articles in the cover letter which accompanies the manuscript. Further, the other articles should be noted and referenced in the manuscript. (p. 7)

Other opportunities to gain experience

As they are staffed by volunteers, publications are constantly looking for new members. Such positions not only bolster résumés, but also offer exposure to papers that have been accepted for publication and offer an insider’s view of the process, which can help to further demystify how journals work. TLT in particular is interested in signing on proofreaders. The editorial staff of TLT is often drawn from its proofreaders, which offers the opportunity to gain experience in several different positions within the publication.

A question raised was whether or not such experience helps during the hiring process at universities, and one participant who had been on hiring committees said most employers want faculty who are willing to give extra effort, and such experiences were definitely positives on a résumé. Other advantages mentioned include the opportunity to branch out beyond just one specialty and to gain a broader picture and understanding of the field.

Conclusion

Hopefully this paper has demystified the process behind getting published—the discussion at JALT2005 seemed to. Finally, in Table 3 I would like to offer some contact information for different publications. Table 3 is an adaptation of the handout used in my presentation, with some information added which arose during the course of the discussion.

I will finish this summary of the JALT2005 discussion with some encouragement from Braine (1998), although the publication process may seem daunting, the proliferation of new journals in applied linguistics and ELT should be an encouragement to new authors. If they choose the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Name</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian Business Journal</td>
<td>Accepts academic articles relevant to business and teaching business English relevant to Asian contexts; internet publication, also planning a print volume in 2006</td>
<td><a href="http://www.asian-business-journal.com/">http://www.asian-business-journal.com/</a> <a href="mailto:editor@asian-business-journal.com">editor@asian-business-journal.com</a> Senior Associate Editor Dr. John Adamson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian EFL Journal</td>
<td>Accepts articles relevant to Asian contexts; also accepts dissertations/theses; internet publication, also publishes print volumes</td>
<td><a href="http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/">http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/</a> <a href="mailto:asian_efl_journal@yahoo.com">asian_efl_journal@yahoo.com</a> Contac: Roger Nunn <a href="mailto:asian_efl_journal@yahoo.com">asian_efl_journal@yahoo.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELT Journal</td>
<td>Interested in articles with an international scope; quarterly publication</td>
<td><a href="http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/">http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/</a> Keith Morrow <a href="mailto:editor@eltj.org">editor@eltj.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JALT Journal</td>
<td>JALT member publication—bi-annual; interested in research articles or book reviews relevant to Asian contexts</td>
<td><a href="http://jalt-publications.org/">http://jalt-publications.org/</a> Current editor: Steve Cornwell <a href="mailto:jj-editor@jalt-publications.org">jj-editor@jalt-publications.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journal of Asia TEFL</td>
<td>Interested in articles, book reviews, and research reports relevant to Asian contexts; internet publication</td>
<td><a href="http://www.asiatefl.org/">http://www.asiatefl.org/</a> Contact: Prof. Jin-Wan Kim <a href="mailto:jinwan@snu.ac.kr">jinwan@snu.ac.kr</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Language and Learning</td>
<td>Interested in both theoretical and applied articles and reviews</td>
<td><a href="http://www.jllonline.net/">http://www.jllonline.net/</a> Contact: Dr. Graeme Davis <a href="mailto:editors@jllonline.net">editors@jllonline.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Language Teacher</td>
<td>JALT member publication—monthly; interested in articles, interviews, book reviews, summaries of lessons, or conference reports relevant to Asian contexts</td>
<td><a href="http://jalt-publications.org/">http://jalt-publications.org/</a> Current co-editors: Ted O’Neill Jacqui Norris-Holt <a href="mailto:tlt-editors@jalt-publications.org">tlt-editors@jalt-publications.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal</td>
<td>Accepts articles, book reviews, and forum pieces; internet publication</td>
<td><a href="http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/">http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JALT CALL Journal</td>
<td>Regular Papers (full research papers), Forums (including new ideas and teaching hints), Software Reviews</td>
<td><a href="http://jaltcall.org/journal/">http://jaltcall.org/journal/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JALT Peer Support Group (not a publication)</td>
<td>Reviews papers and offers free advice</td>
<td><a href="mailto:peergroup@jalt-publications.org">peergroup@jalt-publications.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
right journal, pay careful attention to manuscript preparation, consider revision a learning process, and are patient, they will be rewarded. (p. 8)

**Theron Muller** is co-owner of Noah Learning Center <noahlc@noahlc.jp>, a small English conversation school in Nagano City. He teaches part-time at Nagano Seisen College and the Nagano National College of Technology (Kosen). Contact him at <theron@noahlc.jp>.

**References**
