

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Checking the “native check”

Ian Willey

Kimie Tanimoto

Kagawa University

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This study focused on the English abstract writing experiences of Japanese nursing faculty. Data sources included a survey conducted with Japanese nursing journals, which probes the extent to which these journals require “native checks” for English abstracts accompanying Japanese articles. Interviews conducted with nursing faculty at a Japanese university, to elicit their experiences with and attitudes towards English abstract writing and native checks, provide supplementary data. Results indicate that English abstracts and native checks are commonly required by Japanese nursing journals. Some nursing faculty are troubled by these requirements, and believe that systematic writing support is necessary. Such support may well be welcomed by Japanese researchers across faculties.

本研究は、日本の看護研究者の英語抄録作成に焦点をあてている。日本の看護系学会誌に対し、投稿される英語抄録に対し求めるネイティブチェックに関して調査をおこなった。また、このデータを補完するため日本の大学に所属する看護研究者に対し英語抄録作成とネイティブチェックに関する経験および考えをインタビューした。その結果、多くの看護系学会誌が英語抄録、そしてネイティブチェックを投稿者に求めていることが明らかになった。また、看護研究者はその要求に困難感を感じており、組織的なライティングサポートシステムを望んでいた。以上のことから、日本の研究者に対する全学的なライティングサポートシステムの必要性が示唆された。

It has become a cliché to refer to English as the global language, a *lingua franca* facilitating the exchange of ideas and knowledge among diverse peoples. However, English has also been compared to a *Tyrannosaurus rex* (Swales, 1997)—a rampaging force gobbling up other languages and cultures. Over 90 percent of articles posted on MEDLINE, the online database of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, are written in English (Loria & Arroyo, 2005), and since 1966 the number of non-English articles posted on MEDLINE has decreased at a rate of 1056 articles per year (Lenhard et al., 2006). Researchers whose first language is not English must overcome a language barrier in order to publish and prosper.

Even non-native English speaker researchers writing in their native language cannot escape from the English abstract. The abstract has been called the most important part of an article, as databases displaying

abstracts enable articles to transcend paper-bound journals and gain international recognition (APA, 2002). Despite the abstract’s short length, writing one is no easy task. Researchers with little English writing experience who must produce an English abstract can write in their own language and have the abstract translated by a private translation service. However, such services can be expensive (Salager-Meyer, 2008). Moreover, researchers making use of these services are sometimes unable to communicate directly with the translators, and may feel uncertain about the linguistic and substantive accuracy of the translated work (Swales, 1990). Alternatively, the researcher may write something in English and then seek editorial help from a native speaker. Some journals require such native checks. However, in non-English speaking countries, researchers requiring assistance may have difficulty finding native speakers who can help. Researchers may have to settle for what the authors of this paper call “convenience editing”—that is, asking a native speaker colleague, typically an English teacher, to check their work. However, the efficacy of native checks by language teachers has not been empirically confirmed.

One problem is that these teachers typically lack the researcher’s disciplinary knowledge, as well as knowledge of the writing conventions within the researcher’s field (Spack, 1988; Burrough-Boenisch, 2003). Busy schedules may also hinder communication between checker and author. Feedback from language teachers on students’ writing has been said to be most effective when it is interactive (Hyland, 1990), and the need for interaction may be even greater when one is checking work following the conventions of a discipline “alien” to the checker (see McNab, 1988,

and Ventola & Mauranen, 1991). The checker must thus struggle alone when confronted with difficult to understand expressions or other textual features, making corrections with uncertainty (Flowerdew, 1999). The checker may only be able to make superficial changes, such as in article or preposition use, leaving a paper with deeper flaws in content and wording (Shashok, 2001). The editorial work done may not result in a significantly improved abstract.

It has been suggested that working with two checkers, a native English speaking language teacher and an expert peer (someone sharing the writer’s discipline, and usually native language) will improve editorial quality (Benfield & Howard, 2000; Benfield & Feak, 2006). Language instructors and expert peers may focus on different features of a text when editing: language teachers generally focus on rhetorical and grammatical features, whereas disciplinary peers tend to make fewer changes and concentrate on content. However, procuring advice from two checkers is likely an ideal beyond the grasp of most researchers.

One author of this paper, a native speaking English instructor working at a Japanese university, has experienced firsthand “convenience editing” of manuscripts written by colleagues. His lack of knowledge of specialized terminology and writing conventions in scientific fields led him to question the quality of his editorial work. The second author, a nursing instructor, is attempting to learn how to publish academic papers in English. Combining our interests we have begun an exploratory study into the experiences of nursing faculty with English abstract writing and native checks. Data sources include a survey which investigated the extent to which Japanese nursing journals require native

checks for English abstracts accompanying Japanese articles. Interviews were also conducted with nursing faculty, to elicit their experiences with and attitudes towards English abstract writing and native checks. Although this study focused on the writing practices of nursing faculty, it was hoped that implications would have relevance to Japanese researchers working at different university faculties as well.

Survey of Japanese nursing journals

Objectives

Our objectives were to determine: (1) the extent to which Japanese nursing journals and their reviewers require native checks for English abstracts accompanying submitted Japanese articles; (2) the visibility of these English abstracts, in terms of their placement on electronic databases; and (3) editors' views on common problems in English abstracts produced by Japanese nursing researchers. We also wanted to learn whether or not journal editors feel that university-based writing support for nursing researchers is necessary.

Methods

The homepage of the Japan Society of Nursing Science, which lists major nursing societies in Japan, was first consulted on May 10, 2008. From a list of 33 nursing societies we selected 30 societies that produced their own homepages, and seemed most likely to require English abstracts. Submission guidelines included on the homepages of all 30 participant societies were then consulted to learn whether or not English abstracts and native checks are required.

A five-item questionnaire was then drafted in English and translated into Japanese by the authors. The questionnaire was not piloted, but feedback was received on the English version from a native English speaking professor. The questions ask whether or not: participant journals or their reviewers require native checks; English abstracts are posted on on-line databases; university-based writing support for nursing researchers is considered necessary; and common problems can be found in submitted English abstracts. The complete questionnaire (an English back-translation) is included in Appendix 1.

The questionnaire was sent within an email message to the 20 societies on the list of participants that provided email addresses on their homepages. Confidentiality was assured in an accompanying cover message. These email addresses connected to the main office (*jimukyoku*) of each society. The message was addressed to a “journal editor.” Six weeks later later, the same questionnaire was sent by postal mail to 25 journals, along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Societies who had replied during the email round were excluded. All 30 participant societies thus received an email and/or regular mail questionnaire. Responses to the email and paper questionnaire were received during a period of approximately 2.5 months.

Results

Homepage consultation

Of the 30 participant societies, 26 indicated that English abstracts are required on their homepages (Table 1). Some journals required English abstracts for certain types of

Table 1. English abstract and native check requirements posted on journal homepages

	Nursing society name (English)	English abstract	Native check
1	Kochi Women's University Academy of Nursing	NI	
2	Chiba Academy of Nursing Science	R	X
3	The Japan Academy of Nursing Administration and Policies	R	X
4	Japanese Society of Nursing Art and Science	R	X
5	Japan Society of Nursing Diagnosis	R	X
6	Japanese Association for Emergency Nursing	R	X
7	Japan Society of Disaster Nursing	R	X
8	Japan Operative Academy	R	Recommended
9	Japanese Society of Child Health Nursing	R	X
10	Japan Academy of Neonatal Nursing	NI	
11	The Japan Academy of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing	R	X
12	Japan Academy of Community Health Nursing	R	Peer check required
13	Japan Intractable Illness Nursing Society	NI	
14	Japan Society of Maternity Nursing	R	X
15	Japan Academy of Gerontological Nursing	R	X
16	St. Luke's Society for Nursing Research	R	Peer or native check required
17	Japanese Association for Research in Family Nursing	R	X
18	Japan Academy of Nursing Science	R	R
19	Japan Academy of Nursing Education	R	X
20	Japanese Society for Nursing Research	R	X
21	Japanese Society for the Study of Nursing and Social Work	NI	
22	Japanese Society for Cancer Nursing	R	X
23	Japan Academy of Critical Care Nursing	R	X
24	Japan Academy of Home Care	R	X
25	Japanese Association of Cardiovascular Nursing	R	X
26	Japan Academy of Midwifery	R	Peer or native check required

	Nursing society name (English)	English abstract	Native check
27	The Japanese Red Cross Society of Nursing Science	R	X
28	Japan Academy of Diabetes Education and Nursing	R	X
29	Japanese Society of Fertility Nursing	R	X
30	Japanese Society for Chronic Illnesses and Conditions Nursing	R	X

R = Required; X = Not required; NI = No Information posted.

submissions, such as original research articles, and not for others; requirements varied among journals. Journals that required an English abstract for any kind of submission were counted. The remaining four journals did not indicate whether English abstracts are required (no information was posted). Only one journal, produced by the Japan Academy of Nursing Science (the only society to publish two journals, one in Japanese and one in English), stated that native checks are required. For one journal, a check from an expert peer is required, and two journals required a check from either an expert peer or a native English speaker. One journal recommended, but did not require, that authors receive a native check.

Questionnaire

Of the 20 email questionnaires sent, five responses were received (direct replies by email to one of the authors) for a response rate of 25%. Of the 25 regular mail questionnaires sent, nine responses were received, for a response rate of 36%. Combining both surveys, 14 replies were received from 30 participant journals (a combined response rate of 47%).

Table 2 displays questionnaire results. The majority of journals indicated that they do require native checks, and that their reviewers sometimes require native checks as well. These

responses suggest that native checks are required by journals more often than the guidelines on their homepages indicate.

Moreover, most journals did not post English abstracts on any online databases. Three respondents indicated that abstracts are posted on databases, and two database names were given: CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature) and Web of Science. One respondent, whose journal does not post abstracts on databases, wrote that discussions about applying for database connection were in progress. A majority also stated that university support is necessary, and that problems can be found in the English abstracts submitted to them.

Table 2. Questionnaire responses from nursing journals

	Question	Yes	No	Other	No response
1	NC required by journal?	9 (64.3)	4 (28.6)	1 (7.1)	0
2	NC required by reviewers?	11 (78.6)	3 (21.4)	0	0
3	Abstracts on databases?	3 (25.0)	9 (75.0)	0	2
4	University support needed?	13 (92.9)	1 (7.1)	0	0
5	Problems in abstracts?	9 (69.2)	3 (23.1)	1 (7.7)	1

Note. N=14. Values are numbers (percentages).

NC = Native Check.

Written comments acknowledge problems in the quality of submitted English abstracts: many English abstracts sound too much like direct translations from Japanese (cited twice); occasional discrepancies can be found between the contents of Japanese abstracts and their English translations; and even when the submitter states that a native check was received, the English quality is still poor. One respondent commented that English titles of papers are even more problematic than abstracts. Another respondent wrote that it would be good if the dependability of translation/editorial services could be judged. Three respondents commented on the need for low-cost, university-based writing support.

Interviews of nursing faculty

After the survey of nursing journals was completed, a second questionnaire, focusing on experiences with and attitudes towards native checks and English abstract writing, was given to nursing faculty at a national university, and follow-up interviews were conducted with respondents who volunteered. Describing this questionnaire/interview study in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, but results from the interviews of relevance to the journal survey will be included here.

These interviews, conducted with five nursing faculty (Table 3), followed a semi-structured format (Hyland, 2000), were audio-recorded, and were done in one 30-60 minute session with each researcher. Both authors were present during each interview, conducted entirely in Japanese. Three themes in researchers’ responses seem particularly relevant to the present study: (1) what faculty expect of a native checker’s knowledge and abilities; (2) notions of effective

Table 3. Interviewees’ profiles

Interviewee	Rank	Years experience	No. of abstracts prepared
R1	Professor	15	About 10
R2	Research associate	3	Less than 10
R3	Associate professor	7	3
R4	Professor	12	More than 10
R5	Research associate	3 months	2

university-based writing support; and 3) attitudes towards English abstracts.

What faculty expect of a native checker

All five interviewees stated that professional nursing knowledge in a native checker would be very helpful. Four of the five (R1, R2, R3, and R5) have employed the services of translation/editorial agencies that guarantee native checks, and it is assumed that these checkers possess some nursing knowledge. Overall, they are satisfied with the results, though R2 added that editorial quality does vary from company to company.

Four of the five interviewees (R1, R2, R3, and R4) have, in the past, asked a native speaker colleague to check their English abstracts. These colleagues were typically English teachers without nursing knowledge. These four interviewees stated that lack of nursing knowledge can be overcome by communicating with the checker about their writing. For this

reason, Japanese ability is considered important. R1 stated that familiarity with academic writing is the most important characteristic. R3 felt that it is important for researchers to develop working relationships with native checkers; in doing so, they can help native checkers gradually to learn the language and conventions of nursing abstracts.

Notions of effective university-based writing support

All five interviewees stated that university-based English writing support for Japanese researchers is necessary. Both R1 and R2 stated that researchers need help not only in writing English abstracts and papers, but in the entire submission process, including interpreting and responding to editors' and reviewers' comments. R2 stated that special writing seminars should be organized for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. A similar opinion was expressed by R3, who stated that seminars and workshops should be held regularly. R4 stated that exchange students and foreign faculty—native speakers of British and American English, as well as of other languages—could participate in a low-cost writing support network that would be available to researchers across faculties.

Attitudes towards English abstracts

Only R2 felt that English abstracts accompanying Japanese articles are important. R1 commented that she wanted these English abstracts attached to Japanese articles to be important, but was afraid that in actuality they were not. The problem, she stated, was that these abstracts are probably not posted on electronic databases, and therefore will not be seen

by anyone outside of Japan. R5 stated she did not understand the purpose of English abstracts accompanying Japanese articles.

Discussion and implications

This study was small in scope, and more research is needed before conclusions can be drawn. In particular, we believe that research needs to be conducted on the efficacy of checks by native English speakers on writing produced by researchers working in fields alien to the checker. Clearly, Japanese nursing journals value native checks done on submitted English abstract. Whether or not native checks will significantly improve the quality of submitted abstracts, however, is a topic that requires further investigation.

One somewhat surprising finding was that most journals did not post English abstracts on any electronic databases. In essence, these abstracts will only be viewed by Japanese readers of the printed journal. Japanese readers will also have access, usually on the same page, to the Japanese version of the English abstract. This calls into question the necessity of these abstracts, as two of the interviewees for this study have done. However, one journal respondent indicated that the journal was in the process of applying for inclusion in on-line databases. It stands to reason that most journals hope to have abstracts posted on databases, and many more must be attempting to do so, but acceptance standards are high—at present, for instance, no Japanese nursing journals have abstracts posted on MEDLINE. It is possible that in time journals will be able to meet databases' standards, and then their English abstracts will become internationally visible. However, whether this future

possibility justifies the time, effort and cost involved in producing English abstracts, and attempting to ensure that they attain native speaker quality, is a question worth asking.

Last, most of the journals surveyed, and all of the nursing faculty interviewed, agreed that systematic and user-friendly writing support at Japanese universities is necessary. Considering the current dominance of English in academic publication across disciplines, we believe that such support would be welcomed by researchers across university faculties. Language teachers as well as exchange students could become involved in such systems, and work with Japanese peers, representing different faculties across the university, to offer effective advice. By making the checking of papers and abstracts systematic, face-to-face meetings between checkers and authors, in which texts to be edited can be discussed, can be more easily organized. Such communication should improve the quality of editorial work, and perhaps, as one interviewee suggested, help familiarize teachers with writing conventions in different fields, thereby making them more effective checkers.

Perhaps most importantly, journals and universities need to recognize the difficulties that Japanese faculty experience in writing English abstracts and articles, and take steps to help struggling researchers overcome the language barrier.

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Ian Willey (MA in TESL) teaches English as a lecturer at Kagawa University. <willey@med.kagawa-u.ac.jp>

Kimie Tanimoto (RN, MS in Nursing) is an associate professor in the School of Nursing, Kagawa University. <kimie@med.kagawa-u.ac.jp>

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire sent to journals (back-translation)

1. Does your journal require native checks for English abstracts accompanying Japanese articles?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Other (Explain: _____)
2. Do your journal’s reviewers sometimes require authors to have native checks done on their submitted English abstracts?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Other (Explain: _____)
3. Are English abstracts printed in your journal posted on any on-line databases (for example, CINAHL)?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Other (Explain: _____)
If “Yes,” please give the database name(s): _____
4. Do you think that an English academic writing support system (for example, in editing and submitting academic papers) is necessary at Japanese universities?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Other (Explain: _____)
If “Yes,” please give your thoughts about such writing support in the space below.
5. Have you found common problems in English abstracts produced by Japanese researchers?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Other (Explain: _____)
If “Yes,” please give examples of common problems in the space below.