

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE STANDARDS IN ACADEMIC ARTICLES: ATTITUDES OF PEER REVIEWERS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates comments on English language in peer reviews of manuscripts submitted to the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. The source of data is a corpus of 228 peer reviews of papers written by native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking (NNES) authors. The findings suggest that the reviewers considered English language standard to be an important factor in judging papers to be publishable or not. Papers by both NES and NNES authors attracted comments on English, but the NES-authored papers generally attracted more positive and the NNS-authored papers more negative comment. Certain areas of language appeared to be more problematic for NNS authors and others for NNES authors. Overall, however, the study suggests that we need to look at factors other than English language standards in submitted papers for an explanation of the lower rate of NNES-authored papers judged by reviewers to be publishable.

KEY WORDS. Academic publishing, peer review, referee's comments, English language, non-native English speaking scholars.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina los comentarios acerca del uso de la lengua inglesa en las evaluaciones de originales enviados a la revista *English for Specific Purposes*. Los datos se basan en un corpus de 228 evaluaciones de artículos escritos tanto por hablantes nativos del inglés (HNI) como por no nativos del inglés (HNNI). La investigación demuestra que los evaluadores consideran el estándar de la lengua inglesa un factor importante a la hora de decidir si el artículo es publicable o no. Aunque se comenta el uso de la lengua tanto de los autores HNI como de los HNNI, lo cierto que es los primeros suelen recibir comentarios más positivos que los segundos. En general, sin embargo, el estudio sugiere que además del empleo de la lengua inglesa hay que contemplar otros factores para explicar el porcentaje inferior de aceptación para su publicación de los artículos de autores HNI.

PALABRAS CLAVE: publicación académica, revisión por pares, comentarios de los evaluadores, lengua inglesa, científicos no nativos del inglés.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of work in applied linguistics which aims to describe and account for the particular difficulties of getting published in international English-language journals by scholars whose first language is not English or who conduct research in non-Western contexts. Groups investigated include: Dutch scientists (Burrough-Boenisch); Hungarian, Slovakian and Spanish psychologists (Curry & Lillis); Japanese doctoral students of applied physics, chemistry and cell biology (Gosden, “Thank”; “Thematic”; “Why”); Hong Kong academics in various disciplines (Braine; Flowerdew, “Problems”; “Writing”; “Discourse”; “Attitudes”); and Slovak medical doctors submitting to biomedical journals (Kourilová). However, while some non-native English speaking academics perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage when writing for publication in English (Flowerdew, “Problems”), the question remains of whether a failure to meet required English language standards represents a barrier to publication even when content might be acceptable. It is this question which this paper addresses.

Investigating the impact of English language standards in submitted papers on their progress to publication might, of course, be done from a number of different perspectives. For example, we might consider the writing processes of authors themselves, analyse the language of submitted manuscripts, survey the views of reviewers, or examine the language editing undertaken by journal editors. In the research reported here, however, I will look for insights into the question in the comments on English language in peer reviews –the reports produced by peer reviewers for editors on papers submitted for publication– written for one international journal, *English for Specific Purposes*. The study reported is primarily a quantitative comparison of comments made in reviews of papers submitted by native English speaking and non-native English speaking authors.

The research is presented very much as a limited, exploratory study: it investigates only one type of data from one journal in one discipline. Much additional research is needed both from other perspectives and examining other forms of data before a more general view of the impact of English language standards on the publication process can be gained.

## 2. PEER REVIEW IN THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

### 2.1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PEER REVIEW

Peer review forms part of the decision-making process in a number of scholarly activities, including conference paper submissions, applications for research grants, and book proposals. However, it is in the selection for publication of research articles submitted to journals that peer review has received most attention. For most academic disciplines, the research article is the primary written text by which the results of investigations are recorded and disseminated, and research article writing and revision has become an area of considerable interest (e.g. Bazerman;



Berkenkotter & Huckin; Gilbert & Mulkay; Latour & Woolgar; Myers). Although only one of the ways in which research is assessed, peer review is central to the process of making research findings accessible to the wider academic community: if a manuscript submitted to a journal is not accepted by an author's peers, then it remains unpublished.

Given the significance of peer review in building knowledge in the disciplines, it is perhaps not surprising that a substantial body of literature exists on the subject, much of it within the biomedical field, the general aim of which is to evaluate its effectiveness in controlling the quality of published information. Studies have examined a number of aspects of peer review, including: assessment of its quality (Jefferson, Wager & Davidoff), the ethics of the process (Ernst & Resch; Nylenna, Riis & Karlsson), the qualities of reviewers (Chilton; Goldbeck-Wood), and the effectiveness of blind (Godlee, Gale & Martin; McNutt, Evans & Fletcher), open (Van Rooyen et al.; Walsh et al.), and online peer review (Wood & Hurst).

Relatively little work, however, has been reported on the “language” of peer reviews. This may be because these texts are normally written for editors and authors alone, and not for more general consideration. Issues of confidentiality, therefore, prevent their wider circulation and, consequently, their availability for research. However, analysis of the language of peer reviews can contribute to an understanding of the relationship between reviewers as gatekeepers of standards and conventions within a particular discipline, and writers who seek to convince that they are able to produce texts whose content and expression conform to the conventions established by the discipline.

## 2.2. THE REVIEW PROCESS IN *ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES*

I will now briefly outline the usual review process for the journal *English for Specific Purposes* during the period in which the reviews examined in this research were written (see Section 4).<sup>1</sup> In my experience, this process is not untypical of many other journals. Papers are submitted to one of the editors, who makes an initial judgement on whether there is any prospect of publication and, if the decision is positive, then sends it, together with guidelines for evaluation, to two reviewers. The only reference in these guidelines to quality of language are the questions: “Is the author too succinct in his/her presentation? Too wordy? Is the writing style interesting?” However, reviewers rarely stick rigidly to the evaluation guidelines in their reviews, and are actively encouraged to go beyond them. The reviews are sent to authors, usually unchanged, together with a covering letter from the editor. The corresponding reviews are also sent, for information, to the other re-

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of 2006, a process of online submission was introduced for *English for Specific Purposes*. Although the peer review stage remains much as it is described here, other steps in the procedure have now changed.



viewer. The whole process is blind: reviewers don't know the identity of authors, and vice versa, and reviewers don't know each other's identity.

### 3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE LANGUAGE OF PEER REVIEWS

Previous studies which have focused specifically on the language of peer reviews written in English are Kourilová; Benfield & Howard; Gosden (“Thank”; “Thematic”; “Why”) and Hewings. Kourilová analysed 80 peer reviews received by Slovak biomedical researchers writing in English. She focused primarily on: (i) a set of discourse features—critical items, commands, hedges, compliments, impersonality devices, the involved textual dimension (personal verbs, person pronouns and contractions), doubt and suspicion, and assumptions; and (ii) the targets of criticism, grouped into areas of omission, failure of economy (of words, thought, etc.), language, design deficiencies, unjustified conclusions, formal mistakes (typing errors, numbering, etc.), presentation shortcomings, ethical considerations, and statistics. Her main conclusion was that politeness conventions in peer reviews are different from those in most other forms of academic writing, with criticism more “on-record” and less hedged or mitigated. This, she argues, is a consequence of the difference in power between writer and reader for peer reviews and research articles, and the fact that peer reviews are anonymous. In addition, the targets for criticism identified included not only problems of style and grammar, but also more subtle language choices such as the selection of appropriate modality in order to express generalizations and claims with appropriate levels of certainty or caution.

Benfield & Howard analysed articles on lung cancer submitted to the journal *Annals of Thoracic Surgery* between 1998 and 1999, focusing on the “language burdens of NNS [non-native English speaking] authors.” Of the 50 articles examined, 27 were by NNS authors and 23 native English speakers. Reviewers’ comments on “communications skill” were identified and categorised according to their focus: Language (e.g. “Some of the English structure and spelling needs revision”; “The term metastatic lung cancer is ill advised”), “Organisation (including comments on discussion and results or methods”: e.g. “the discussion is not precise, but rambles),” and writing quality (e.g. “this section needs to be re-written so that the reader can understand what the authors are trying to explain”). Most comments were in the language category, and the most significant differences between the manuscripts written by native and non-native English authors were in the categories of language and writing quality.

Gosden (“Thank”; “Thematic”; “Why”) examined various features of a corpus of 40 peer reviews written by 15 Japanese and 25 native English-speaking reviewers on papers submitted to a hard science “Letters” journal. Gosden (“Thank”; “Why”) classified reviewers’ comments according to topic, giving the percentage of the total comments for each sub-category as follows: discussion (33.8%), technical detail (26.9%), claims (19.8%), references (12.5%) and format (7.0%). Additional comments were on difficulties with English language, although the majority of



these referred only to general problems. Gosden (“Thematic”) looked at the content of sentence-initial Themes in the reviews in order to gain insights into the motivation for referees’ comments. He found that some two-thirds of Themes focused on “the degree to which referees believed manuscript authors had been successful in making a convincing presentation of their research findings intended to target readers” (11).

Hewings studied evaluative adjectives in the same corpus of peer reviews for *English for Specific Purposes* analysed in the present article. The research categorised and quantified the entities evaluated by reviewers and the adjectives associated with these in order to ascertain what was expressly valued by reviewers and the qualities by which they were judged. The main classes of entities were those in which assessment was made of: the quality of the paper in general; the language used; the claims made; the analysis presented; and the validity of the aims of the research. The main categories of adjectives were those to do with: interest; suitability; comprehensibility; accuracy; and importance. The findings suggest that through the evaluative language they use, reviewers showed themselves to be taking on multiple roles. On the one hand, they discourage the publication of work that fails to meet what they perceived to be required standards but, on the other, they offer encouragement to the authors of submitted papers, guiding them towards publication.

## 4. DATA

### 4.1. CORPUS DETAILS

The corpus consists of 228 reviews of papers submitted to the journal *English for Specific Purposes* from December 1998 to April 2004. These were compiled into an electronic corpus of around 160,000 words. (For more details of the corpus and how it was compiled, see Hewings, forthcoming.) The 228 reviews were written by a total of 56 reviewers. Most reviewers wrote more than one review, and some substantially more than that. The highest number written by one reviewer was 12.

For the purposes of this research, the reviews were grouped into one of 3 categories: those recommending that the paper should be published in its current form or with very minor changes (“Publish” –category A in Table 1); those recommending that the author(s) should revise and resubmit the paper (“Revise and resubmit” -B); and those recommending that the paper should be rejected (“Reject” -C). The majority of reviews in the corpus recommended “Revise and resubmit.” Table 1 gives the number of reviews in each category, divided into reviews of papers written by native English speaking (NES) authors and non-native English speaking (NNES) authors. (Note that the percentage figures in this and subsequent tables are rounded up or down to the nearest one percent.)

In the case of joint-authored papers, if one or more of the authors was a NES, the review was put into the NES category. For the majority of papers, the name, place of work and author biodata were sufficient for me to decide with some



TABLE 1. JUDGEMENT OF PAPERS: ACCEPT (A), REVISE AND RESUBMIT (B) OR REJECT (C) (%AGE OF TOTAL FOR EACH GROUP).

| AUTHOR      |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| NES         | NNES        |
| A= 31 (27%) | A= 11 (10%) |
| B= 69 (61%) | B= 77 (68%) |
| C= 15 (13%) | C= 25 (22%) |
| Total= 115  | Total= 113  |

certainty that the author(s) could be designated “NES” or “NNES.” Where any doubt arose, I looked at the language of the paper. If there were errors or expressions that suggested interference from other languages, authors were designated “NNES.” This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that a NNES-author was able to produce academic writing indistinguishable from a NES, or that their paper had been very carefully proofread by a NES. But, in my judgement, the division of papers into NES- or NNES-authored made here is sound.

The period of time for which reviews were collected began at the date from which I judged a reasonably complete set of reviews might be compiled and ended at a date when assistance with corpus collection ended. In a sense, then, the corpus was randomly collected in that I did not make any selection myself. Nor did I intend to collect a balanced corpus of equal numbers of reviews of NES- and NNES-authored papers. It was merely by good fortune, then, for the present comparative study, that the number was roughly equal. As the total number of reviewers who I judged to be NNES was small, and in subsequent analysis no clear differences emerged in comments by NES and NNES reviewers on language in the papers, in what follows no distinction is made between NES- and NNES-authored reviews.

The figures in Table 1 show that a substantially higher percentage of reviews of NES-authored papers recommended acceptance (27% compared with 10% of NNES-authored papers) and a lower percentage recommended rejection (13% compared with 22% of NNES-authored papers). Further, a lower percentage of NES-authored papers were judged to require resubmission.

## 5. ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS ON LANGUAGE IN THE REVIEWS

### 5.1. ISOLATING COMMENTS ON LANGUAGE

The first stage of the analysis was manually to identify and isolate all parts of the 228 reviews that included what could be designated “comments on language” as opposed to “comments on content.” For the most part, this was unproblematic and comments on language could be further divided into “general comments” and “specific comments.”





“General comments” were taken to be those which make some summarising statement about the quality of language, expression or style in the paper. Most positive general comments said how the paper is “written” (e.g. “This is a well-written paper...” (0392)<sup>2</sup>; “...the article is clearly and succinctly written” (1161); “...the article is written in a pleasant, accurate English” (0582)) or how it “reads” (e.g. “...the paper reads well...” (0804); “The style is lucid and easy to read” (1302)). The negative general comments were somewhat more varied. The majority noted the quantity of “problems” (e.g. “Throughout the paper, there are many occasions where English errors, lack of clarity of expression, and superficiality detract from the argument” (0012); “...there are a number of grammatical and stylistic problems that need to be addressed in the manuscript” (1011)). Many others recommended revision or proofreading (e.g. “There are a lot of language errors which really need proofreading” (0052); “...there are countless minor errors and infelicities in style that need to be addressed” (0825)).

“Specific comments” were of two main types. Some commented on a particular aspect of language, such as punctuation (e.g. “This paper also suffers from numerous problems in... punctuation conventions” (0201)), or pronoun use (e.g. “There is a rather confusing and inconsistent use of pronouns to refer to the ESP teacher —sometimes “he” and sometimes “she”” (0492)). Others noted errors or infelicities at particular points in the text (e.g. “purpose to establish” should be “purpose of establishing” (1232); “The sentence beginning “It seeks to...” is a bit difficult to follow” (0843)).

It was not always possible, however, to decide whether a comment was referring to language or content. For example, in:

Section 2 comes across as a patchwork of references, with too little coherence; for example, it jumps from speech-act theory to the statement that “language is then the warrant of cultural identity.” (0072)

it is difficult to know whether “too little coherence” refers to the omission of language (such as conjunctions or sentence connectors) which signals connections, or whether the reviewer thinks that the author’s claim (that “language is... the warrant of cultural identity”) is not valid on the basis of what has previously been said about speech act theory. As it was impossible to resolve such questions, where there was ambiguity of this kind, most comments were omitted from the analysis. The exception was where reviewers specifically commented on “organisation” or “structure” in the paper, as in:

for a report of an empirical study, the organization of the information is so unusual that it is difficult to evaluate the findings. (0132)

The structure of the introduction needs to be revised. (1242)

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<sup>2</sup> The number after each extract refers to the review from which it was taken.

In the vast majority of these cases the comments appeared to relate to the ordering of material in the paper and/or the language used to signal connections between parts of the text. On this basis, I decided that comments on organisation or structure were part of “language” rather than “content” and worthy of further investigation here. The findings on this are reported separately in Section 5.5, and these comments are not included in the analysis of general and specific comments presented in Sections 5.2-4.

Three of the reviews noted that detailed comments were included on the manuscript that was returned to the editor. While these comments were not available for this research, in all cases these reviews gave an indication of the main areas of difficulty that were noted on the manuscripts.

## 5.2. PAPERS WITH/WITHOUT COMMENTS ON LANGUAGE

Of the 228 reviews, 140 (61%) included comments, either general or specific, on language.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF REVIEWS OF NES- AND NNES-AUTHORED PAPERS INCLUDING COMMENTS ON LANGUAGE

| AUTHOR                            |                                      |                                   |                                      |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| NES                               |                                      | NNES                              |                                      |
| Reviews with comments on language | Reviews without comments on language | Reviews with comments on language | Reviews without comments on language |
| A= 25 (22%)                       | A= 6 (5%)                            | A= 7 (6%)                         | A= 4 (4%)                            |
| B= 38 (33%)                       | B= 31 (30%)                          | B= 49 (43%)                       | B= 28 (25%)                          |
| C= 6 (5%)                         | C= 9 (8%)                            | C= 15 (13%)                       | C= 10 (9%)                           |
| Total= 69 (60%)                   | Total= 46 (40%)                      | Total= 71 (63%)                   | Total= 42 (37%)                      |

(The figures in brackets refer, in the 2 NES columns, to the percentage of all 115 NES-authored papers and, in the 2 NNES columns to the percentage of all 113 NNES-authored papers.)

It can be seen that a similar proportion of reviews of NES- and NNES-authored papers include comments on language: around 60%. Breaking these down according to overall judgement of the paper (A, B or C), however, some differences emerge, and these are highlighted in the following sections.

## 5.3. GENERAL COMMENTS ON LANGUAGE

In total, 78 (34%) of the 228 reviews included a general comment or comments. In 45 of these reviews (58%) these comments were positive, and in 24 (31%) negative. In the remaining 9 (12%) there were both positive and negative comments. A breakdown of these figures according to whether the papers were judged A, B or C is given in Table 3.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF REVIEWS OF NES- AND NNES-AUTHORED PAPERS INCLUDING POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, OR POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMMENTS

| POSITIVE COMMENT(S) |                | NEGATIVE COMMENT(S) |                | POSITIVE + NEGATIVE COMMENT(S) |                |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Author<br>NES       | Author<br>NNES | Author<br>NES       | Author<br>NNES | Author<br>NES                  | Author<br>NNES |
| A= 8                | A= 2           | A= 0                | A= 4           | A= 0                           | A= 0           |
| B= 17               | B= 12          | B= 4                | B= 10          | B= 3                           | B= 5           |
| C= 1                | C= 5           | C= 1                | C= 8           | C= 0                           | C= 1           |
| Total= 26           | Total= 19      | Total= 5            | Total= 19      | Total= 3                       | Total= 6       |

One clear, and unsurprising, observation to be made from these figures is that more reviews of papers judged worth of publication (A) included positive general comments than those rejected (C). Taken together with the fact that more reviews of rejected papers included negative general comments than those where their recommendation was to publish, the figures suggest that overall standard of language was one of the criteria by which the reviewers judged papers to be acceptable for publication. In addition, positive general comments appeared in more reviews of NES-authored papers (26 compared with 19 reviews of NNES-authored papers), and negative comments appeared in fewer reviews of NES-authored papers (5 compared with 19 reviews of NNES-authored papers). A clear pattern emerges in these reviews, then, of a more generally favourable judgement of the overall quality of language in the NES-authored papers by the reviewers.

#### 5.4. COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC POINTS OF LANGUAGE

All of the comments on specific points of language were criticisms, pointing out errors and other problems and/or suggesting changes. The comments were categorised according to their “target of criticism” (after Kourilová), and this categorisation, with examples for each category and sub-category, is given in Table 4.

TABLE 4. CATEGORISATION OF COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC POINTS OF LANGUAGE

| TARGET OF CRITICISM         | EXAMPLES   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>1 Clarity</i>            |  |
| Phrases or sentences are    |  |
| 1.1 unclear or awkward      | – The first sentence of the paragraph which starts with “If, however, ...” is awkward (0611)                         |
| 1.2 incomprehensible        | – “practically a compilation of ten 2000 words level resources so far”<br>—I’m afraid I don’t understand this (0322) |
| 1.3 ambiguous               | – The phrase “marginal comments” is ambiguous (0752).  |
| <i>2 Grammar and syntax</i> |  |
| 2.1 existential clauses     | – Existential clauses are used rather too often where a simple SVO sentence might do a better job (0032)             |
| 2.2 modals                  | – “might be acceptable” > “would be acceptable” (0472)   |





| TARGET OF CRITICISM  | EXAMPLES   |
|--|--|
| 2.3 subject-verb agreement                                       | – “has increased the importance” should be “have” (0941)   |
| 2.4 relative pronouns  | – Perhaps a “that” is missing: “...McCarthy (1995) has shown THAT spoken grammar has distinctive characteristics” (0611)                   |
| 2.5 prepositions   | – “check how much” not “check about how much” (0091)   |
| 2.6 conjunctions   | – Conjunctions (however... moreover...) do not seem appropriately used (0381)  |
| 2.7 articles   | – [Change] “to constitute a potential evidence” (0981)   |
| 2.8 verb forms   | – “purpose to establish” should be “purpose of establishing” (1232)  |
| 2.9 tenses   | – p. 7, first line, the simple past should be used instead of the present perfect (1073)   |
| 2.10 sentences are either too long or too short                  | – ...the paper... has a strong preponderance of short sentences (0794)   |
| 2.11 word order.   | – [Change] “whether the reader had understood or not the passage” (0271)   |
| <i>3 Lexis</i>   |  |
| 3.1 choice of lexis  | – “inferred” should be “implied” (0383)  |
| 3.2 collocation  | – “duties” cannot act as subject to “be successful” (0212)   |
| 3.3 hedging (too much, too little, or inappropriately expressed) | – Overall there is more hedging than I think is necessary... (0383)  |
| 3.4 use of personal pronouns                                     | – replace references to generic “he” etc. with non-gender-specific terms (1051)  |
| <i>4 Spelling</i>  |  |
|  | – “tact” or “tack”? (0714)   |
|  | – copyeditor > copy editor (0752)  |
| <i>5 Punctuation</i>   |  |
|  | – Commas should be used instead of parentheses for all the non-defining relative clauses in this paragraph (0831)                          |
|  | – “...there is a comma missing between “Reading” and “Attendance,” otherwise I don’t understand the sentence (0951)                        |
| <i>6 Register</i>  |  |
| Words or phrases are considered inappropriate for                |  |
| 6.1 an “academic style,” or                                      | – “A lot” should be changed to something less conversational (0093)  |
| 6.2 a research paper   | – “We would welcome...” Please alter the wording: it reads as a comment from the editors of the journal, not the writers of a paper (0804) |
| <i>7 Cohesion</i>  |  |
| 7.1 unclear antecedents  | – To what does “this” in the abstract refer, precisely? (0862)   |
| 7.2 connections between sentences                                | – I’m not sure that “on the contrary” means what is intended here (0461)   |
| 7.3 metadiscourse signalling the organisation of the text        | – The text would profit from some more organisation... in terms of metatext to help the reader’s advance orientation (0032)                |

The figures in Table 5 show the number of reviews in which each target of criticism was mentioned. No account was taken of the frequency of occurrence of comments on a particular target in a particular review; that is, however many comments on, say, punctuation, there were in a review, this only counted once. This was because in a few reviews there were frequent comments on a particular target.

TABLE 5. NUMBER OF REVIEWS OF NES- AND NNES-AUTHORED PAPERS INCLUDING CRITICISMS OF LANGUAGE FEATURES

| TARGET OF CRITICISM                                       | NES-AUTHORED PAPERS | NNES-AUTHORED PAPERS |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|
| <i>1 Clarity</i>  | Total= 13           | Total= 15            |
| Phrases or sentences are                                  |                     |                      |
| 1.1 unclear or awkward                                    | 10                  | 12                   |
| 1.2 incomprehensible                                      | 2                   | 3                    |
| 1.3 ambiguous   | 1                   | 0                    |
| <i>2 Grammar and syntax</i>                               | Total= 24           | Total= 32            |
| 2.1 existential clauses                                   | 0                   | 2                    |
| 2.2 modals  | 1                   | 1                    |
| 2.3 subject-verb agreement                                | 1                   | 2                    |
| 2.4 relative pronouns                                     | 2                   | 1                    |
| 2.5 prepositions  | 4                   | 4                    |
| 2.6 conjunctions  | 0                   | 2                    |
| 2.7 articles  | 2                   | 6                    |
| 2.8 verb forms  | 4                   | 3                    |
| 2.9 tenses  | 3                   | 5                    |
| 2.10 sentences length                                     | 2                   | 4                    |
| 2.11 word order   | 5                   | 2                    |
| <i>3 Lexis</i>  | Total= 12           | Total= 26            |
| 3.1 choice of lexis                                       | 9                   | 16                   |
| 3.2 collocation   | 1                   | 1                    |
| 3.3 hedging   | 1                   | 1                    |
| 3.4 personal pronouns                                     | 1                   | 8                    |
| <i>4 Spelling</i>   | Total= 8            | Total= 6             |
| <i>5 Punctuation</i>                                      | Total= 16           | Total= 7             |
| <i>6 Register</i>   | Total= 7            | Total= 5             |
| 6.1 style not academic                                    | 5                   | 5                    |
| 6.2 style not appropriate for research paper              | 2                   | 0                    |
| <i>7 Cohesion</i>   | Total= 8            | Total= 9             |
| 7.1 unclear antecedents                                   | 6                   | 4                    |
| 7.2 connections between sentences                         | 1                   | 2                    |
| 7.3 metadiscourse signalling the organisation of the text | 1                   | 3                    |

Although difficulties were noted in all 7 categories for both NES- and NNES-authored papers, certain general categories and sub-categories appeared to be more problematic for one group of authors or the other. For NNES-authors we might note problems with lexis, in particular choice of lexis and use of personal pronouns. Reviews of NNES-authored papers included:

McDonald proposes a duality > proposes a distinction (0032)  
 The key term “differed”... should be “deferred.” (0072)  
 economical > economic(0212)  
 significative > significant (0461)

Comments on the use of personal pronouns mainly referred either to the reviewer’s preference for “their” rather than the “his/her” or “his or her” used by authors:

“his/her future in learning English”: change to “what areas of English to focus on in their future learning” (0835)

I’d avoid the “his or her” on line 4, rephrasing in the plural: “...issues such as the role of ESP instructors, their knowledge of the conceptual framework...” (0952)

or the use of masculine personal pronouns to refer to non-gender-specific roles:

The teacher and student are assumed to be male (use of “his” throughout). I feel this assumption should not be made visible in the text. (0512)

Within the category of “Grammar and syntax,” articles appeared to be a greater problem for NNES- than NES-authors. Reviews of NNES-authored papers include:

I found myself inserting many “the” or “a” or deleting some. The incorrect use of articles disrupts cohesion and makes it hard for the reader to follow the flow of logic. (0942)

I believe the normal term is “the Internet” rather than “Internet.” (0602)

Problems highlighted in more reviews of NES- than NNES-authored papers were unclear antecedents:

“Them” has no obvious antecedent. It seems to refer to “technology.” (0091)

“it” in the sentence starting “While they saw speech...” lacks a clear antecedent. As is, the meaning of the sentence is ambiguous. (0701)

and word order:

2nd par, 4th line. Position of “only.” It should read: “these take on meaning only when they...” (0541)

I tried not to be old-fashionedly critical of split infinitives, but I did find “to not only present their findings” a very awkward expression! (1341)

There were also more reviews of NES-authored papers with comments on spelling and punctuation. This seems to suggest either that NES-authors are less knowledgeable or careful in these areas than NNES-authors or that reviewers are less tolerant of problems in these areas in papers written by NES authors.

## 5.5. COMMENTS ON ORGANISATION

For the reasons given in 5.1 above, it was decided to examine comments on organisation and structure in addition to those explicitly on language. *WordSmith Tools* was used to search the corpus of 228 reviews for all instances of “organi\*” (i.e. organise, organisation, organization, etc.) and “structur\*” (i.e. structure, structured, structures, structuring) and isolate those cases which referred to the organisation/structure of the paper or a part of the paper under review.



In total, 53 (23%) of the 228 reviews made a comment on organisation/structure using one of these words. Table 6 gives the number of reviews which included positive, negative, or both positive and negative comments, together with the judgement (A, B or C) made by the reviewers.

TABLE 6. NUMBERS OF REVIEWS OF NES- AND NNES-AUTHORED PAPERS INCLUDING POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, OR POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMMENTS ABOUT ORGANISATION/ STRUCTURE

| POSITIVE COMMENT(S) |          | NEGATIVE COMMENT(S) |           | POSITIVE + NEGATIVE COMMENT(S) |          |
|---------------------|----------|---------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|----------|
| Author              | Author   | Author              | Author    | Author                         | Author   |
| NES                 | NNES     | NES                 | NNES      | NES                            | NNES     |
| A= 5                | A= 1     | A= 0                | A= 0      | A= 0                           | A= 0     |
| B= 7                | B= 5     | B= 10               | B= 13     | B= 2                           | B= 3     |
| C= 0                | C= 2     | C= 0                | C= 4      | C= 0                           | C= 0     |
| Total= 12           | Total= 8 | Total= 10           | Total= 17 | Total= 2                       | Total= 3 |

Example positive comments were: “The material is well organized...” (0351); “The argument is tight and well-structured...” (1502). Perhaps surprisingly, there were 2 reviews, both of the same paper, with positive comments on the organisation of papers that were rejected. Both reviewers were agreed that organisation was good (“The length, bibliography and organization are also strong” (0571); “...the material is well-organized” (0572)), but that the content was not relevant to the readership of the journal, and for this reason should be rejected. Example negative comments were: “I do feel that a more step-by-step organisation would be clearer” (0762); “The paper is...not properly structured” (0613).

Although numbers are small, the higher number of reviews of NES-authored papers commenting positively on organisation/structure judged to be worthy of publication (5 compared with 1 NNES-authored paper) and the higher number of reviews of NNES-authored papers commenting negatively and recommending rejection suggests that organisation/structure may have been factor in making these judgement on these papers.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The discussion centres around two questions. First, what evidence does this study provide that the standard of English language in papers submitted to *English for Specific Purposes* has an impact on whether a paper is accepted or rejected, or whether the author is asked to revise and resubmit? It is not, of course, possible to prove a direct relationship, and any evidence must be treated merely as indicative. However, the fact that over 60% of the total number of reviews included one or more comments on language suggests that reviewers treat it as one impor-

tant factor in coming to their judgement. This is supported by the weighting of positive general comments and comments on organisation/structure in the reviews recommending publication and, conversely negative comments in the reviews recommending rejection.

The second question is whether evidence is provided of differences in the number and type of comments in the reviews related to whether they are reviewing NES- or NNES-authored papers. Again it must be acknowledged that it is not possible to establish whether any differences observed are a direct result of differences in English language in the submitted papers, or because reviewers respond differently to NES- and NNES-authored papers. Intuitively, we might expect NNES-authored papers to attract relatively more negative comments on English in reviews and, indeed, to some extent this seems to be supported by the evidence of the study. More reviews of NNES-authored papers included general negative comments and criticisms of organisation/structure. This suggests either that there is more to be done in the NNES-authored papers as a whole for them to meet required English language standards, or that reviewers more often offer recommendations for change in the NNES-authored papers. Furthermore, more NES-authored reviews which recommended publication included positive general comments. Overall, then, the study suggests that reviewers felt more able to give positive feedback on the language in NES-authored papers, and NNES-authored papers deserved more criticism.

However, it is important not to over-emphasize these differences. The study shows that negative general comments on language and organisation/structure are not restricted to reviews of the NNES-authored paper: the NES-authored papers do attract criticism, although in relatively small numbers. More significantly, perhaps, is that a substantial number of reviews of NES-authored papers include specific negative comments on language. While the overall number for NNES-authored papers is higher, for particular areas of language—punctuation and spelling—NES authors appear to attract more criticism. At the very least, this suggests that the reviewers do not pay “less” attention to English language standards in the NES-authored papers.

The general implication of these findings is that contributors to *English for Specific Purposes* are likely to face reviewers who take seriously English language standards in submitted manuscripts. However, there is no clear evidence that NNES authors are disadvantaged relative to NES authors because they do not have English as a first language.

We are left, however, with the fact that more reviews of NNES-authored papers recommended rejection or resubmission in the reviews examined (see Table 1). Although this is a question for further study, some explanation can be offered if those reviews are examined which give a clear main reason or reasons for rejecting the paper. In the 25 of these which reviewed NNES-authored papers, 6 (24%) explicitly stated that the papers offered nothing new or of interest to the readership and a further 3 (12%) said the papers reported work that was outside the field of ESP. In the corresponding 15 reviews of NES-authored papers, 2 (13%) said they offered nothing new or of interest and none claimed that they were not ESP-re-



lated. At this stage it is possible only to speculate on the reasons for this mismatch, particularly in the NNES-authored papers, between authors' and reviewers' expectations of what is required. It may be that the authors were insufficiently aware of the need to ensure that a paper should be within the field of interest of *English for Specific Purpose*; or that they had not read enough previous papers in the journal, or the editorial statement on the journal's field of interest, to enable them to make this judgement; or that what is considered to be "ESP" in their educational context falls outside its boundaries as perceived by the journal's reviewers; or that authors did not have access to resources to enable them to keep up to date with current ideas in the field. Whatever the reasons, they appear to lie outside any difficulties authors may have had in producing written English.

It was noted above that the study reported here is exploratory and limited in scope, and to close, I note a further possible limitation. The investigation has shown a clear concern among the reviewers with standards of English, as expressed in their reviews. However, they could be untypical in that, for many of them, their work involves teaching and researching the English language. Consequently, they may have a greater commitment to helping authors achieve what they see as necessary standards. Further research looking at attitudes to English language expressed by reviewers for other journals and in other disciplines is needed to understand whether this is indeed the case.

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