

Editorial

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH

The English language and communication skills are vital for international publication in engineering education.

With the news items in **Engineering Education World** this month there is news about attempts and requirements to improve foreign language proficiency in continental Europe.

These moves are very timely as English is the predominant language in professional publishing today. Yet it is not at all self-evident that engineering education papers from non-English speaking countries have similar acceptance rates as from the English speaking world. A glance through the countries of origin of our papers reveals that the bulk of the papers come from the USA, UK, Canada and Australia, with further sizeable numbers from Singapore and Hong Kong. The bias is in favour of the USA. It is clear that papers are predominantly submitted from English speaking countries.

There are several reasons for this, not just that more papers are read as well as written in these countries. The first, and foremost reason, is that in English speaking countries a much higher emphasis is given to communications studies, reporting and scientific writing. The organisation and presentation of papers coming from an English speaking source, is therefore often superior to that from non-English sources. Language quality is an additional factor. Referees become sceptical when the English is below standard. It is definitely advisable for an author for whom English is a foreign language to submit the paper for scrutiny to a native English speaker before submission. This practice is common for research paper submissions from large companies.

When is the accumulation of errors non-fatal? When the problem is the language alone, a copy editor can do a lot to save the paper for publication. A fatal situation is when communication problems make meanings and interpretations ambiguous. In consequence, there is a bottom line, even when the content of a paper is acceptable, if the quality of the English is below par.

There is an additional factor, from our experience, that engineering educators in non-English speaking countries are often less proficient in English than research scientists who are habitually writing research reports and publications. The situation of submissions is further compounded by the difference in incentive between the English and non-English speaking countries to submit a paper, and especially an educationally related engineering paper. A typical Assistant Professor in the USA requires publications for promotion and tenure. Often his initial task consists of setting up or updating an undergraduate laboratory or course. Writing up innovative aspects of this experience can be a contribution towards a publication to be counted for tenure. I often get contacted for information on the journal and its acceptance rates from tenure candidates or from their departments. Again, such practise is completely unknown in Europe.

In conclusion it can be said, that in addition to the number of submissions, language quality, presentation, and communications skills, are all factors in the higher rate of acceptance of papers from English-speaking countries.

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