
Editing around the World

AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean: a communication bridge between mainstream and emerging research communities

Karen Shashok

Translator and Editorial Consultant, C./ Comp. Ruiz Aznar 12, 2-A, 18008 Granada, Spain; kshashok@kshashok.com

Obstacles to research publication faced by non-native users of English from developing regions are a barrier to knowledge-sharing and community-building.¹ For example, articles that attract the attention of international readers are harder to publish for those whose first language is not English. Hooman Momen of the World Health Organization recently noted that “an array of editors (language editors, author’s editors, copy editors, technical editors and manuscript editors) is valiantly bridging the gap by trying to harness the output of scientists, whose mother tongue is often not English, within the syntax and grammar of the English language. They often succeed brilliantly, but the demand is so great and is increasing so quickly for the small and stagnating number of editors, that change needs to occur.”²

AuthorAID projects

AuthorAID projects (www.wikipedia.org/AuthorAID) aim to help researchers overcome obstacles to participation in the international scientific community by helping them publish successfully in English, and by helping editors improve the quality of journals produced in developing countries. Initially, AuthorAID projects were conceived as systems in which both retired gatekeepers and working author’s editors would communicate with researchers by email. This is a useful way forward for journals that offer an online option to request manuscript editing assistance, such as *Epidemiology and Environmental Health Perspectives* (www.ehponline.org/international/resources.html).

AuthorAID volunteers also work on site. For example, Barbara Gastel, director of the AuthorAID@INASP project (www.authoraid.info), has travelled around the world to provide training for authors and editors. Other forms of collaboration with organizations involved in science publishing are being developed as opportunities arise—a positive outcome in light of increasing demands for assistance from emerging research communities and the advantages of consolidating resources. So far AuthorAID seems to be succeeding, and this is an important achievement for emerging research communities who wish to “be empowered to contribute to the international scientific discourse”²

At the ninth EASE conference in Krakow in 2006, Phyllis Freeman and Anthony Robbins, founders of AuthorAID, explained some of the problems faced by authors in developing countries who wish to publish in mainstream or “international” journals but have limited

access to high-quality language and editing help.³ These concerns are shared by many members of EASE, including editors who would like to publish more contributions from emerging scientific communities. According to Freeman and Robbins,⁴ some of the challenges faced by researchers from developing countries are:

- uncertainty about which journals may be suitable for a submission
- unfamiliarity with editorial conventions
- persistent pressure to write in English
- conflicts with collaborators about authorship and order of authors
- lack of scientific and statistical tools to analyse data as required by journals
- editors’ and publishers’ inattention to development problems and topics relevant to developing countries.

AAEM in Iran

AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean (AAEM), the newest of the AuthorAID projects, began its first on-site phase in January 2009 when I moved to Shiraz, Iran. This location was chosen because the intense research activity and high academic standards at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (SUMS; www.sums.ac.ir/english/shiraz/university.html) create a receptive environment for capacity-building. Most students and staff at SUMS have a very high level of English proficiency, an important consideration given that I had no knowledge of Farsi when I arrived in Iran.

Dr Farhad Handjani, who has donated countless hours to AAEM as the local project coordinator, handled most of the local preparations. A physician and editor with extensive experience as a research mentor and trainer in Iran and abroad, Dr Handjani serves as advisor to the Chancellor of SUMS on international relations, and is also Secretary-General of the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (www.emro.who.int/emame/index.htm). In addition to facilitating communication with the host institution, he designed the overall workplan so that it met the needs of local users effectively, and liaised with colleagues at other universities who requested support from AAEM.

Thanks to his organizational skills and superb administrative support provided by Ms Ghaemi at the Office of Clinical Research Development, a home base for AAEM was created on the SUMS medical school campus, so I was able to start work at full speed within 48 hours of arrival.

It is hard to imagine a more welcoming and supportive work environment for a volunteer editor and trainer newly arrived in an unfamiliar country with no skills in the local language. Physician-editors Dr Rasekhi and Dr Motazedian were generous beyond the call of duty in sharing space and serving as occasional interpreters between myself and the few authors whose spoken English was not yet good enough for them to respond to queries about their manuscript. Because of their medical training Drs Rasekhi and Motazedian were able to facilitate editing sessions by explaining Iranian health care concepts and terms that have no precise equivalent in English. As observers of author editing sessions, they learned many things that will prove useful in their own work for their journal.

At the Center for Development of Clinical Research located in Namazee Hospital, Ms Gholami, a research expert and experienced author's editor, coordinated AAEM support. She skilfully facilitated consultations with authors, and her drive to improve the capacity of the centre to provide high-quality editing to as many researchers as possible was inspirational.

During the initial on-site phase of AAEM, which lasted until mid-June 2009, dozens of manuscripts were edited and submitted to journals. Many of the difficulties identified by Freeman and Robbins⁴ were encountered, yet authors were highly motivated to overcome them. Health science researchers wanted to learn not only about strategies for effective article writing, but also about publication ethics, accurate citation methods, and ways to decide which journals were the most appropriate outlets for their work. According to authors, the most important outcomes of these one-on-one sessions were manuscripts more likely to meet gatekeepers' expectations of quality, the acquisition of writing and editing skills, and increased confidence in the value of their research. Several manuscripts have already been accepted for publication, and the outcome of all submittals will be tracked to see how helpful AAEM is in increasing publication success.

Some manuscripts were sent to author's editors in Europe and elsewhere, who worked with Iranian scientists via email. These highly-qualified AuthorAID volunteers responded positively to personal requests to get involved, and are an essential component of AAEM. As the project moves forward we hope to expand the email network so that as many authors as possible in the eastern Mediterranean region can benefit from personalized editorial aid provided by email. Meanwhile, the willingness of these busy colleagues to donate some of their time to AAEM is an encouraging sign that increasing numbers of colleagues wish to help close the geographic and cultural gaps in international science information transfer.

Biomedical journals published in Iran⁵ are expected to meet high quality standards established by the National Commission on Medical Journals of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education. In Shiraz I worked for several journals published by the host institution, editing manuscripts, training editorial staff, and advising on current best editorial practice. There were also opportunities to advise editors in the region as a manuscript reviewer.



A breakfast meeting in Iran

Future plans include extending AAEM support to more journals in the region.

Education and training events were organized for medical students and postdoctoral researchers, as well as for staff researchers, author's editors, and journal editors. As an AAEM trainer I participated in the 13th Pan Arab Conference on Diabetes in Cairo (www.arab-diabetes.com/PACDHIGHLIGHTSCAIRO2009.pdf) and in several conferences and workshops throughout Iran. The most popular workshop topics were challenges faced by non-native-English-speaking researchers, strategies for successful publication, and ethical issues in research publication.

Support for AuthorAID in the Eastern Mediterranean

To keep administration and expenses to a minimum, AAEM was launched as a no-budget project designed to operate on a combination of work donated by volunteer author's editors, infrastructure provided by the local host institution SUMS, and personal funds. For the first on-site phase of the project SUMS generously provided room and board for me, covered some travel expenses, and arranged for access to PCs and internet connections at various facilities. This vital support was possible thanks to the Chancellor's Office, headed at the time by Professor Mohammad Hadi Imanieh, and the Vice Chancellory for Research, directed by Doctor Mohammad Hossein Dabbaghmanesh. In addition Professor Mohammad Vasei, Deputy Minister of Health and Medical Education, was enthusiastic about the project and offered both financial and administrative support. Travel expenses to conferences and other universities were covered by local organizers. Neither I nor any of the volunteer editors receive any honoraria for AAEM work.

This economic model keeps costs and paperwork to a minimum, and ensures that researchers and journal editors do not have to pay for any of the support they receive. A potential drawback, however, is that the availability of volunteers for pro bono work depends on economic and personal factors, so variations in the project's capacity to respond to requests for assistance must be expected.

The key resource that has made AAEM successful so far is the determination of the two coordinators to make it work. Doctor Handjani and I are fortunate to share both an understanding of the challenges and a focus on the

potential benefits of AAEM for health and health research in the eastern Mediterranean region. The resulting synergy, together with freedom from the need to respond to inputs from an administrative superstructure, have allowed us to identify priorities and plan support efficiently.

Personally, I found that the satisfaction of working with highly-motivated researchers, journal editors, and author's editors was an invigorating change from working in a developed country—a setting where access to many things that facilitate research publication is sometimes taken for granted. The editors and researchers I met did not shy away from hard work to meet the highest possible standards, were eager to learn as much as they could, and were clearly appreciative of the support AAEM has been able to provide.

But undoubtedly the most important personal benefit has been learning first-hand about a country, a culture, and a people frequently represented in western media in ways that do not reflect the cultural and intellectual diversity within modern Iran. Experiencing the Iranian culture provided opportunities to learn about world history and the origins of some now-universal institutions. The challenge of acquiring a new language was made enjoyable thanks to ceaseless encouragement and support from native speakers of Farsi (or Persian, as the language is also known).

This cultural learning process has been bidirectional, of course, marked by opportunities to dispel misconceptions

about Spain, Europe, and other western societies. As builders of communication bridges, science editors from different cultural backgrounds are eager to participate in conversations about science and the world—as the increasingly diverse community of EASE members well knows!

I thank Dr Farhad Handjani for his useful comments on parts of the manuscript and the AAEM volunteer editors for their support.

References

1. Uzuner S. Multilingual scholars' participation in core/global academic communities: A literature review. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 2008;7:250–263.
2. Momen H. Language and multilingualism in scientific communication. *Singapore Medical Journal* 2009;50(7):654–656.
3. Robbins A, Freeman P. AuthorAID: developmental editing assistance for researchers in developing countries. *European Science Editing* 2007;33(1):9–10.
4. Freeman P, Robbins A. The publishing gap between rich and poor: the focus of AuthorAID. *Journal of Public Health Policy* 2006;27(2):196–203.
5. Habibzadeh F. A bird's eye view of science publishing and editing in Iran. *European Science Editing* 2006;32(4):98–100.