

# The Journey of a Non-Native English Speaker towards Scopus Publication: An Autoethnography

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## Abstract

*Research publication continues to be a challenge for faculty in higher education institutions. Much more is expected of research leaders. My journey towards Scopus publication started over a decade ago when I was designated as a research director. I worked hard on my first publication in Scopus for years, but to no avail. Applying Autoethnography, I chronicle my publication journey, which can be a glimpse of the situation of other neophyte researchers who are non-native English speakers. In this paper, I discuss my struggles toward publication, such as losing confidence, excitement, and ignorance of standards, and Filipino English as a liability. However, I also expounded on the essential lessons I gained, such as article-journal fit, journal quality and standards, editing help, and focus and determination. Indeed, publishing in high-end journals like Scopus is challenging, but there is always a way, particularly learning from past mistakes and maximizing the lessons learned.*

*Keywords: publication, Scopus, english, Autoethnography, Philippines*

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## 1.0 Introduction

Research productivity has been a constant concern among faculty and school administrators for decades (Iqbal & Mahmood, 2011; Karabchuk et al., 2021; Nafukho et al., 2019; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013). Research is not an easy endeavor. Even graduate and undergraduate students find it difficult to conduct as part of the course requirements (Moulding & Hadley, 2010; Obuku et al., 2017; Obuku et al., 2018). Research is part of the tasks for faculty in higher education institutions (HEIs). The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippines recognizes the need to level up the quality of graduate education. One concrete move was the CHED Memorandum Order 15, series of 2019, otherwise known as Policies, Standards, and Guidelines for Graduate Programs. One of the salient points of this Memorandum is publication. Students can only graduate if

they have a publication. Similarly, the faculty and deans must show a track record of scholarly publications in high-end journals, meaning these are internationally peer-reviewed journals or high-impact journals like WoS or Scopus. As a dean in the graduate school and research director, I was responsible for ensuring such compliance. It must begin with me.

I believe many researchers who are non-English native speakers can relate to my experience. My journey provides a glimpse of neophyte researchers' struggles and success stories trying to make their presence in the scientific community. In this paper, I will share my struggles in publishing in Scopus-indexed journals while sharing the lessons I gained through trial and error until my first paper was published.

I have previously published in peer-reviewed journals that are not indexed in Scopus. It has

been a challenge since I became a faculty, research director, and dean in graduate school. I also acted as a peer reviewer for some journals of local and foreign colleges or universities. What needed to be improved was publication in high-end journals like Scopus. My case is similar to most of the faculty in the Philippine HEIs. Based on the data, the country is far beyond research publication compared to its neighboring countries, particularly Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia (Kamalski & L'Huillier, 2011). Journals published in the Philippines need help getting indexed in Thomson Reuters and Scopus (Tecson-Mendoza, 2015). The Philippines is only ranked fifth among Southeast Asian Nations in terms of publication in Scopus (Guido & Orleans, 2020). But, even if few made it to these databases, the citation is very low (Tecson-Mendoza, 2015). I tried collaborating with experts from other countries with extensive experience in publication because it has been proven that collaboration with experts from different countries improves publication outputs (Dusdal & Powell, 2021; Kamalski & L'Huillier, 2011; Pinho & Reeves, 2021).

I initiated contacts with researchers abroad to establish a network both for my school and for my professional engagements. I believed I was in the right direction because not having a track record necessitates collaborating with seasoned published researchers. Studies showed that professional networking increases publication productivity (Yemini, 2021; Ynalvez & Shrum, 2011). Our school collaborated with one university by formally signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). However, regarding research collaboration, our partner university required a researcher from our school to have at least a publication in a Scopus-indexed journal. It was a slap on my face, but I took it as a challenge since, at that time, none from our school had a publication in a Scopus-indexed journal, including the research director, and that was me. I took it personally, at least to challenge myself to publish one. It was also a way to

validate my capacity and credibility as a researcher and a researcher leader. Indeed, I needed help with publishing in high-end journals.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) conducted a series of consultations among the stakeholders in graduate education to improve the country's education quality. These consultations were part of the planned new CHED Memorandum Order as the basis for all graduate program offerings in the country. It was evident during the consultation sessions that research publication would become a crucial component or requirement in graduate and post-graduate programs. For example, students cannot graduate if they cannot publish a paper in peer-reviewed journals. It follows that professors and deans must take the lead. Hence, a requirement for teaching in graduate school is for a faculty to have a publication track record. Deanship has a higher requirement. The CMO 15, series of 2019 was released in December 2019, which, as expected, included publication in international and refereed journals as a requirement. The schools were given three years to comply with the requirements as stated in the CMO. As a professor in a graduate school, I had no choice but to comply with these requirements. The challenge was not only for me but also for deans and other graduate school faculty members. Being an officer of a regional organization of graduate education, I know that many of my colleagues, like deans and program heads/coordinators, need to have publications in high-end journals like Scopus or ISI.

Aside from complying with the requirements of CMO 15, our school applied for an Institutional Sustainability Assessment (ISA) as recommended by CHED. Research and publication, with higher points given to articles published in Scopus or ISI, are two criteria included in ISA. In addition, the school also applied for a deregulated status from CHED, wherein research and publication are naturally part of the criteria. These requirements

put a lot of pressure on me as the research director. It should start with me as the leader. How can I inspire or lead others to publish in high-impact journals like Scopus if I do not have one? There is no other way but to find ways for me and my colleagues to publish because it is a requirement for accreditation. Moreover, it is part of the standards for a quality graduate education. In other words, it is about more than just satisfying the requirements but about ensuring the quality of education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This paper aims to describe my journey as a neophyte and non-native English speaker in publishing in a Scopus-indexed journal. Specific questions that guided this study were: (1) What were the struggles of the neophyte and non-native English speaker in his journey toward publication in a Scopus-indexed journal? (2) What are the important lessons in his journey after publishing in a Scopus-indexed journal?

## **2.0 Methods**

### **Research Design**

I used Autoethnography as a research methodology to narrate my journey toward Scopus publication. Autoethnography as a qualitative inquiry is gaining interest among qualitative researchers. Though its definition is still evolving, autoethnographers consider this qualitative inquiry a process and product (Ellis et al., 2011). "In qualitative research traditions, Autoethnography has a methodological value in using personal experiences to illustrate facets of cultural experiences" (Kim & Lee, 2021, p. 4). Tracing its roots in the 1970s like the term "auto-ethnography" used by Heider (1975) and Hayano (1979) and Goldschmidt's (1977) "self-ethnography," Autoethnography is used to describe a culture based on the experiences of people. However, in the 1990s, researchers started writing their personal experiences to reflect on cultural

experiences (Adams et al., 2017). The main objective of doing Autoethnography is to expose a personal experience related to a cultural experience (Adams et al., 2017). In this study, I employed an analytical/interpretive autoethnography, which, according to Ellis (2004), allows the authors to explain their worlds based on their own stories. Denzin (2013) considered interpretive autoethnography to be the study of the biography and performance of an individual. It is my publication story that paints the world of other neophyte researchers. The aim of analytical/interpretive autoethnography is to analyze the story narratives (Ellis, 2004).

I narrated my experience in submitting papers in Scopus-indexed journals. I related it to the experience of other neophyte researchers still struggling to publish at least one article. Brown (2011) described it as a form of self-study. Analyzing autoethnographic data combines introspection and cultural analysis (Hokkanen, 2017). In analyzing my narratives and the comments of the editors and peer reviewers, I looked at my journey as that of other neophyte researchers in publishing in high-end journals who tirelessly journeyed the narrow road of publication. It is my way of focusing on my experience and revealing the wider cultural experiences of neophyte researchers. Narrating and describing one's story is what makes Autoethnography unique.

### **Sources and Collection of Data**

The data came from the editors' email responses, comments I received from editors and peer reviewers, and personal reflections, which I usually shared when conducting research seminars and workshops. First, I received immediate email responses, which were all rejection notices. Second, when my paper passed through the initial review of the editorial working group, I was happy enough to receive comments from the peer reviewers. Lastly, I also chronicled my experiences, which were part of my input or topic during research

seminars and workshops I conducted. These pieces of information are collected and subjected for analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the rigor of Autoethnography and to advance reliability, I ensured that data from the emails detailing the comments and suggestions from editors and peer reviewers were included in the analysis. Giving facts helps establish the credibility of doing Autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). For the narrative to be valid, it must appear real (Ellis et al., 2011). I ensured that my story was well-written and followed the chronological sequence of the journey until my first publication in a Scopus-indexed journal. However, Ragan (2000) commented that Autoethnography cannot be evaluated using traditional standards in qualitative research. Instead, Ragan (2000, p. 232) suggested some pan-disciplinary standards guided by the following questions - "Is this piece interestingly and accurately written?" "Is its fundamental issue important?" "Will readers learn anything by reading it?" "Does it (potentially) make a contribution to the discipline and the scholarly inquiry in general?" In this paper, I tried to provide an interesting account of my journey. I expound on the issue most neophyte researchers experience in the realm of publication, particularly on the rejection of the paper. Lastly, I contextualized my story to contribute to the debate on the standards of publication in high-end journals and how neophyte researchers can learn from my story.

In addition, as a qualitative inquiry, I ensured the trustworthiness of the study guided by the criteria set by Guba (1981) - credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. As to credibility, I made sure that I followed what Moustakas (1990) suggested by following the procedure of "reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance or meaning, and ultimately elucidating the themes and essences that comprehensively, distinctly, and accurately

depict the experience" (p. 32). First, I analyzed and reflected on the specific comments of the editors and peer reviewers. Second, I made sense of the meanings and came up with the themes that expound my journey towards publication in a Scopus-indexed journal. Also, my experience as a qualitative researcher helped me follow the protocols and standards of doing qualitative inquiry. On transferability, it is already a given in Autoethnography since the author's experience is projected to depict the scenario or experience of others who have similar experiences. It is one of the criteria in qualitative research wherein the findings of the study can be related to a different scenario (Merriam, 1998). As to dependability, I kept the notes from emails and comments from the journal itself through its system. These were my bases for the analysis, plus my reflections. In traditional qualitative research, dependability is also achieved when the findings are supported by related studies on experiential learning (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), which I also incorporated to strengthen my experience with the experiences of others. Moreover, in autoethnography, the data are very dependent on the author's experience. As to confirmability, which is supposed to report the findings as coming from the participants and not from researchers (Shenton, 2004), this is a different case for Autoethnography since the results are about the author's experience. Nevertheless, I ensured that my experience is interpreted based on the actual journey to publication, which is almost the same experience as other neophyte researchers.

### **Data Analysis**

I gathered the data from email responses, my notes, and the comments of the editors and peer reviewers of the articles I submitted. Then, I applied thematic analysis by identifying essential points and grouping these into themes based on the two research questions. Specifically, I applied the six phases as espoused by Braun and Clarke

(2006). First, I reviewed the notes and documents I gathered to understand the meaning more. Second, I generated codes to put meaning on the important points. Third, I identified themes based on the codes I generated. Fourth, I analyzed the identified themes and grouped those similar ones. Fifth, I finalized the identification of the themes and provided a definition. These were the process of data reduction. Sixth, I discussed the result by explaining the themes.

### **3.0 Results and Discussion**

#### **Struggles of the Neophyte and Non-Native English Speaker in His Journey towards Publication in a Scopus-Indexed Journal**

##### ***Losing One's Confidence***

I had been submitting articles to Scopus-indexed journals, and of course, these were rejected. I came to the point of questioning myself. Do I have the qualities and skills as a researcher, much more as a research director? I was on the verge of surrendering. Nevertheless, I was able to pass the initial stage. The journals' editors considered two articles, and these papers were sent to peer reviewers. The first paper was returned, and I lost my appetite to revise it. The comments from the reviewers were so overwhelming, leading me to think as if I was going to start a new study. The original paper appeared to be a waste. I did not work on the revision out of frustration and put the paper aside for months.

The second paper, co-authored by my wife, which was rejected many times, landed in a new journal. I read on its website and found a program to help authors in their journey toward publication. To my surprise, upon submitting the article, the editor considered it. We were so excited because we finally had a window of opportunity to publish our paper. After a few months, we received an email with the comments of three peer reviewers. We were so

happy upon receiving the email, but upon reading the comments, my memory returned to the first paper, which I eventually put to rest. I kept reading the comments and again lost my confidence in myself. I shared the results with my wife. Fortunately, she was more positive, but we did not touch the paper afterward. In short, I was overwhelmed by the comments and suggestions. Months passed, and something still needed to be done on the paper.

Then, a series of earthquakes jolted our city. Our school buildings were damaged. No one was allowed to report to work. I had nothing to do. Then, the COVID-19 Pandemic came. I began looking at several unfinished works with little to do while undergoing quarantine. One of those was our paper. I noticed it was already more than a year since I viewed the reviewers' comments. So, together with my wife, we began working on the comments. It was a defining moment in our lives as couple-researchers because that paper was later accepted for publication, which I will discuss later in this paper.

##### ***Excitement and Ignorance of Standards***

My first big mistake was too much excitement and ignorance of the journal's standards. Initially, I was eager to submit my papers to any top journal I searched on the internet. Consequently, I had been rejected over and over again. The lesson was simple. I just kept submitting without seriously reading the guide for the authors. Editors almost automatically reject papers if authors do not follow the journal's guidelines (Asif et al., 2020; Datta & Jones, 2018) or these are out of scope (Kang et al., 2015). Conversely, I was so confident about the quality of my article. However, it did not fit the journals I submitted. The usual answer I receive from editors is, "Your paper is good, but it is not within the scope of our journal." After attending some training and understanding the editors' replies, I began to study each journal, especially the guide for authors, scope, and

journal information. I began to identify the specific format, citation styles, and the number of words. In short, I learned from my mistakes.

### ***Filipino English as a Liability***

The usual comment I received from peer-reviewers was to subject my paper to editing by a native English speaker. In the study conducted by Cocal and De Vera (2018), Filipino researchers received feedback that their papers were poorly written and needed a review by native English speakers. I know I do not possess the skills of a native English speaker. Unfortunately, publishing in high-end journals needs sufficient English and writing skills (Prihandoko et al., 2018). I need money to pay the editing fee usually promoted on the website by the different journals. But the main reason was I wanted to learn the ropes of publishing on my own, with the help of willing friends. I challenged myself to keep improving based on the comments of the editors and peer reviewers. However, I was a bit pissed off about comments like subjecting my paper to a native English speaker for editing. It is what it is. The global readership needs an acceptable and proper English language, either American or British.

### **Important lessons in his journey after publishing in a Scopus-indexed journal**

I recalled the journey of my first publication in Scopus. Though there are many realizations, I pointed out five important lessons.

#### ***Article-Journal Fit***

Publishing in top-ranked journals is more complicated than defending a thesis or dissertation. Pushed with pressures from accreditation requirements and the desire to take the lead as a research director, I focused on publishing my first article in a Scopus-indexed journal. I began selecting journals fitted for one of my articles with the help of a Filipino scholar who gave me the list

of journals indexed by Scopus. While, according to Björk (2018), the global acceptance rate is 35%-40%, publishing in Scopus is a different ball game. Khadilkar (2018) even put it at 80% rejection for top journals. That is scary, indeed, for a beginner like me. Publishing in Scopus-indexed journals is going to be an uphill battle. It is even a competition with other competent researchers worldwide because a certain journal receives hundreds of submissions and would only choose the best ones. Nevertheless, choosing an appropriate journal matters a lot. In my case, I chose a journal that focused on qualitative research since most of my research outputs employed qualitative design.

#### ***Journal's Quality and Standards***

One of my colleagues advised me to submit in journals with a lower impact factor. The rejection rate, he emphasized, is very high for journals with a high impact factor. At that time, one of my articles was already in the review process without me knowing its impact factor. Knowing this practical strategy, I already considered the impact factor for the journals on the succeeding submissions, though I needed help finding much difference because I still received many rejections. Four of my articles are still under review for months already. Nevertheless, I kept in mind the advice of my colleagues not to get discouraged and just keep moving, which I also shared during the seminars I conducted.

Aside from choosing the appropriate journal, I also learned that editors look for the article's social value. First, the reviewers explained how the paper should be formatted and written according to the journal's expectations. Second, I learned from the comments of our reviewers, who emphasized the importance of the paper's unique contribution. My first paper was accepted because of its unique contribution to the body of knowledge regarding childless couples. The editors and peer reviewers were interested in knowing our research and

gaining insights from our inputs because we are also childless as a couple. My second article about freelancing received a favorable response because the work-from-home scheme became relevant during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

### ***Editing Help***

I also learned about the humility to seek help. I had to accept my poor English writing competency. I followed the advice of editors and reviewers for me to seek editorial help from a native English speaker. It was a difficult task since I did not have many friends who were native English speakers or researchers themselves. It was a challenge, but I had to. Also, I subscribed to an online grammar checker. This software truly helped me a lot. I could only submit my paper by subjecting it to an online review.

### ***Focus and Determination***

Moreover, the most important insight I learned is focus and determination to publish. Though the desire to publish remained high, it was only when we were forced to stay at home because of the damage to our school buildings due to the series of devastating earthquakes in late 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in early 2020 that I began seriously working on the comments of the reviewers. With the help of my co-author, I was surprised that we worked very fast and productively. We began to rekindle our passion for writing. In less than a month, we resubmitted the revised article. After some time, it was returned with more comments. However, we were encouraged. We were determined at that time and accepted the comments constructively. Then, on May 11, 2020, our paper was finally published. The feeling was unexplainable. It was a relief. Finally, I was able to publish one article in a high-end journal. When I shared the news about this success with my colleague in Malaysia, she asked what quartile. I checked and told her. She

was surprised and congratulated me because it was my first publication, but it was a Q1 journal. I only knew the importance of Q1 or Q4 once she explained it to me.

Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus publications are today's most accepted and popular databases (Pranckutė, 2021). The journey toward Scopus publication is a mix of excitement and frustrations for neophyte researchers, just like my experience. The motivation could be personal and professional. Lambovska and Todorova (2021) developed a model called Publish and Flourish. It is an attempt to encourage researchers to publish in World of Science or Scopus journals. With 120 researchers from Bulgarian universities, Lambovska and Todorova (2021) found reputation, prestige, and promotion among the highest motivational drivers and potential features. However, getting there has never been easy. There is a sense of inferiority when you see your colleagues already having several publications in high-end journals while you do not have a single one. Some academicians would pay for co-authorship, while others succumbed to easy and fast publication in predatory journals (Dell'Anno et al., 2020; Kurambayev & Freedman, 2021a). Indeed, there are real person-professional struggles for neophyte researchers, especially non-native English speakers, when it comes to publication in Scopus and other high-end journals.

I mentioned that one pressure on my part as a research director was the requirement for accreditation. Moreover, researchers have several motivations or purposes for publishing. One clear driver motivation is reputation (Kurambayev & Freedman, 2021b). Being acknowledged by colleagues and the scientific community generally adds prestige to one's career. While aiming for publication in a Scopus-indexed journal remains a top priority on my list, I am also aware of the purging of several journals that no longer subscribe to Scopus standards (Krauskopf, 2018) or the possible bias against non-Western authors

(Tennant, 2020). Nevertheless, I focused on publishing in these prestigious journals, though I knew it was an uphill battle.

What puzzled me at first was how to address my natural liability as a non-native English speaker. Later, I realized it was not just me but other Filipino authors who succumbed to the same fate (Cocal & De Vera, 2018). Scopus-indexed journals require higher English proficiency (Huang, 2010; Prihandoko et al., 2018). Since this particular skill is difficult to address given the years of being accustomed to the kind of English expression and writing styles, it is always beneficial to adhere to the usual comments from editors to have the papers edited by a native English speaker. It is one lesson that could level up the playing field for non-native English speakers.

Choosing the right journal and following its standards put the researchers on the right track, unlike my earlier experiences when I submitted whatever I initially thought fit my article. I learned a hard lesson from my earlier careless submission attempts. One should respect and follow the style and standards of the journals. Otherwise, these are enough reasons for rejection (Asif et al., 2020; Datta & Jones, 2018; Kang et al., 2015). Lack of merit or contribution to the body of literature could also be the main reason for rejection (Dolnicar, 2020; Stolowy, 2017). It is something neophyte researchers should pay close attention to. The problem of duplication or repetition of studies might be common for theses and dissertations, mostly unpublished, but it is different in journal publications. One should put forward the novelty and unique contribution to the body of literature for a paper to be seriously considered for publication.

What I learned about starting from low-impact factor journals does not mean these are of low quality because I still receive many rejections based on my experience. It is just a logical advice for neophyte researchers to consider. The focus should be on English writing quality, especially for non-native

English speakers. For neophyte researchers, editing help from a native English speaker could bolster the quality of the writing. It is also advisable to use technology for editing help. More importantly, focus and determination should be the guiding principles for any researcher. Help can be sought, but not focus and determination. The will to contribute to the scientific community with one's research output, coupled with the desire to help improve society, is and will always be the motivating factor for any researcher, both neophytes and seasoned ones.

#### 4.0 Final Reflection

My journey to publishing in Scopus was challenging but very rewarding. I learned many lessons along the way. Indeed, it is a big challenge for non-native English speakers like me because English journals have standards to follow. Knowing the journal's scope, aims, the guide for authors, and other relevant information is a must before editing your paper and eventually submitting it. As a neophyte researcher, it is advisable to be guided by a mentor with extensive publication experience, aside from using technology for editing. Most importantly, focus and de-termination are two important ingredients of success in writing. After my first publication in a Scopus-indexed journal, I learned many things. It is not just about the English language but the whole spectrum of writing quality articles.

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