In Depth

HOW TO FIND AND KEEP NONNATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS AS CLIENTS  
by Katharine O’Moore-Klopf, ELS

Academic publishing in the United States has long been fueled by the publish-or-perish imperative. Now researchers around the world, especially those in Asia, are affected by that imperative and are producing a great many reports for submission to peer-reviewed English-language journals. And guess who gets to edit them: you do, if you’ve made your own luck.

If you have the patience, persistence, and proper manuscript-side manner, you can cultivate a large clientele of researchers from all over the world who are nonnative English speakers. They need your editing because they must get their articles published in English-language US and UK journals to secure tenure, promotions, and even, in some cases, housing. A large portion of my clientele consists of about 60 physician-researchers from 20 nations. I do substantive editing of their articles, which collectively have gone on to be accepted for publication by 35 English-language biomedical journals. I find it rewarding to work with these clients, first because their research is fascinating and second because they are often effusively grateful for my editorial assistance. These authors, not the journals that they submit their articles to, pay me for my editing.

I fell into English as a second language (ESL) editing—sometimes called English as a foreign language editing—by accident. Before I began freelancing full time, my last in-house job was as a production editor for a medical publisher. The longer I held that job, the more often I was given the most difficult manuscripts to edit: those written by nonnative English speakers. I had become known as the editor with a talent for finding the intended meaning behind the stilted syntax. Once I began freelancing, that medical publisher began referring many of its ESL authors to me because the in-house staff members just didn’t have the time to do the substantive editing that those authors’ manuscripts needed. As those authors realized the value of my editing, they began referring their colleagues to me. And those colleagues went on to refer their colleagues to me. And because, for transparency’s sake, I require my ESL authors to note in their articles’ acknowledgment section that I conducted professional English-language editing for them, the journals that publish those edited articles became aware of my skills and referred even more ESL authors to me.

**HOW TO FIND ESL AUTHORS**

But what if there’s no one to send ESL authors your way?

First, note on your business website, in your résumé, in online profession-related directories where you have an entry, in your LinkedIn profile, on your business blog, and everywhere else online where you have a professional presence that you specialize in ESL editing, and explain what that is. Add it to your signature for posts to profession-related e-mail lists so that colleagues will think of you when one of their clients needs a referral.

Second, hang out where these authors are likely to be. For example, if you like working with university students who need ESL editing, contact university department heads and let them know that your services are available and that you’ll abide by university regulations on editing students’ work. Contact universities’ international student organizations and ask if they will post your contact information and a description of your services on their website or their page of the university website. If you want to work with researchers who need ESL editing to get their journal articles published, contact professional organizations that deal with subject matters you like to edit and ask them to make your contact information and services description available to their members.

When I contact the editors-in-chief of journals whose subject matter I feel comfortable working with, I let them know that I know that ESL authors are doing great research but that because of budget and schedule limitations, the journals’ staff members likely can’t spend the necessary time to heavily edit these authors’ manuscripts. I add that I work directly with authors and would be pleased if the editor-in-chief would consider referring promising ESL authors to me. The editors-in-chief are often happy to do this for me because I make their jobs—and the jobs of their editorial staff members—easier by taking the substantive editing off their hands.

Third, as you gain ESL clients, those who are pleased with your work will be happy to tell others about your services. Make it clear in your communications, especially written ones, that you’ll gladly accept referrals. You can even put a note to that effect at the bottom of your invoices or your payment receipts. When you finish a project for an ESL client, be sure to mention that you’ll be available for editing additional materials from that person in the future. E-mail these clients periodically to say hello, and remind them that you enjoyed working with them and would like to work with them again.

**HOW TO KEEP ESL AUTHORS AS CLIENTS**

What freelancer doesn’t want repeat clients? If you find that you enjoy working with ESL
and other concerns. I explain that my editing
Journal editors base their decisions on content
that their article will be accepted by a journal.
You can’t guarantee that your authors’
publishing terms, such as callout, explain what
theirs in the editing process. If you have to use
and what your responsibilities are versus
what you do, how long you expect editing to take,
consultation, how many rounds of editing you
will do, how long you expect editing to take,
how authors will pay
ESL authors are proficient enough in English
not all languages use contractions. Although
you communicate with your authors
Break up
e-mail addresses: your main business address
and a free webmail address.
Use easy-to-understand language every time
you communicate with your authors. Break up
complex and compound sentences into easier-
to-digest portions. Avoid using idioms and
contractions; many idioms don’t translate well, and
not all languages use contractions. Although ESL authors are proficient enough in English
to understand much of what you write, they
can’t understand a native English speaker’s
eapons and allusions.
Explain everything. Spell out your working
process and how and when authors will pay
you. Lay out what times you are available for
consultation, how many rounds of editing you
will do, how long you expect editing to take,
how you want them to respond to your queries,
and what your responsibilities are versus
theirs in the editing process. If you have to use
publishing terms, such as callout, explain what
those terms mean.
Avoid promising that your editing will work
miracles. You can’t guarantee that your authors’
work will be published just because you edited it.
The first time that we work together, I tell my
ESL authors that my editing doesn’t guarantee
that their article will be accepted by a journal.
Journal editors base their decisions on content
and other concerns. I explain that my editing
can make their writing flow smoothly and
follow the conventions of their target journals,
which can help with acceptance.
Be respectful at all times. Some ESL authors
may feel at a disadvantage because they must
deal with a system that doesn’t speak their first
language, so put them at ease by being extra
careful to convey your high regard for their
work. This is easy to do in the tone you take in
your e-mails and queries. There is no such thing
as saying please or thank you too often. Never
come across as condescending or lecturing
when discussing problem areas in manuscripts.
Suggest fixes rather than just asking authors
to clarify muddy sentences. This gives authors a
better understanding of the problems that you
are seeing.
Be transparent. Top-quality editing is built
on frank, open communication. In some cul-
tures, being direct is sometimes seen as being
impolite, so your authors may not bring up
some of their concerns. But if you are straight-
forward, you tacitly give your authors permis-
sion to be straightforward with you.
Thank your authors for the privilege of work-
ing with them. I take every chance I can find to
let my authors know that I value being able to
read about their research, which helps them
feel that I am on their side.
Be an ambassador for your nation’s publishing
industry. Offer to explain any publishing pro-
cesses or conventions that you’re familiar with
but that may differ from those in your authors’
nations or cultures. Being helpful in this manner
is one more way to show that you are on your
authors’ side. Your authors will demonstrate
their gratitude by coming back to you with their
next research article or chapter for a multi-
author book.
Endear yourself to your authors by speaking
their languages. You don’t have to be fluent in
their languages, but you can convey informa-
tion that you must often provide to authors—
about the editing process, how to review
your edits, or how to pay your invoices—in
their languages. For example, I wrote a one-
page explanation of how I want my authors
to review my edits. I paid professionals to
translate that explanation into eight languages.
The cost, spread out over time, wasn’t large; it
was a tax-deductible business expense. Most
important, though, is that my authors realize
that I care enough about them to make it
easy for them to understand my instructions.
I plan to commission translations in additional
languages as the need arises.
Learn about your authors’ cultures and show
appreciation for them. Authors are likely to ask
for your services again if you’re a good editor,
but they will rush to work with you again if you
show that you value them as people and not
only as sources of income. I have researched
the major holidays in my clients’ cultures. On
each holiday, I e-mail them good wishes and
thank them once again for the privilege of
working with them.
Engage in a little small talk from time to time.
If your authors mention an award or promotion
that they have received, congratulate them. If
you come across an article in their field that
you think they might find interesting, share it
with them. Ask your authors to let you know
when the articles or book chapters that you
edit for them have been published. Let them
know that you ask because you want to be able
to congratulate them on their successes—and
then follow through.
Keep your authors posted about your work
schedule. When I’m going to be away at a business
conference or on vacation, I e-mail my authors ahead of time to let them know. This
allows them to plan ahead for their editing
needs. And it often prompts authors whom I
haven’t worked with in a few months to e-mail me with offers of new projects.
Wrap up the year with thanks. At the end
of each year, I snail-mail a “Happy New Year”
card to each of my authors, enclosing some of
my business cards, wishing them a healthy and
prosperous new year, and thanking them for
working with me in the preceding year. They
love this, and many have referred their col-
leagues to me immediately after receiving those
greeting cards. I send KOK Edit coffee/tea cups
to the authors I work with most frequently.

RESOURCES ON WORKING WITH ESL AUTHORS
Here are some good resources with additional
tips on working with ESL authors:

- “Bridging the Gap: Working Productively with ESL Authors”
- “Understanding the Challenges of Non–English-Speaking Authors”
- “The Editor as Translator (or: How Do You Say That in Calculus?)”
- “Editing English Content for Non-English Readers”

Katharine O’Moore-Klopf of KOK Edit has
worked in publishing since 1984. In January, she
will celebrate 17 years as a freelance copyeditor. As
a board-certified editor in the life sciences and
a medical copyeditor with an ESL specialty, she
has helped researchers in more than 20 nations get
their articles published in 35 US and UK biomedi-
cal journals by removing language barriers. She is
also the creator and curator of the Copyeditors’
Knowledge Base.

Katharine O’Moore-Klopf of KOK Edit has
worked in publishing since 1984. In January, she
will celebrate 17 years as a freelance copyeditor. As
a board-certified editor in the life sciences and
a medical copyeditor with an ESL specialty, she
has helped researchers in more than 20 nations get
their articles published in 35 US and UK biomedi-
cal journals by removing language barriers. She is
also the creator and curator of the Copyeditors’
Knowledge Base.