Writing in English for Publication: Climbing to the Top

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Summary
Writing in English for publication can be a struggle. At the James Boswell Institute participants in the writing course get a guide, equipment and tools to facilitate publishing their research paper.

Introduction
Anyone who has been to The Netherlands knows that it is a flat country by the sea. There are no mountains in sight. It is impossible to climb mountains in Holland. Nevertheless, PhD candidates all need to do this: climbing to the top of the mountain, climbing to the publication of their research paper in a prestigious journal. One of the activities at the James Boswell Institute (JBI) is guiding PhD candidates on the path to publication of their English manuscript. The course is called "Writing in English for Publication" in which a learner-centred approach has been adopted. It has been developed around the learners' needs.

Below you can read how you can guide your PhD students to that same top. The course can also be used for other students who need to write an academic text. First, there will be information about the type of expedition, i.e. a course description. This is followed by a characterization of the guide and his or her role, that is to say the role of the language trainer. Then the equipment the climbers need is discussed, i.e. what the course participants need to bring, and, finally, the tools are described, in other words, the elements and aspects of writing the students gather on their way to the top.

Type of expedition: the course and its participants
First of all, the type of expedition. The team usually consists of second or third year PhD candidates who need to publish the results of their research in an academic journal. These PhD students come from the Netherlands or have an international background, for example Asian, African, Central European. Their level of English varies between levels B2 and C1 of the Common European Framework. The maximum number of participants is fourteen and they either come from the same faculty or from totally different fields of research. The length of the expedition is seven weeks of three-hour meetings, once a week.

The guide: the English language trainer and their role
The guide is the English language trainer who needs to be familiar with the requirements of publishing research results in academic journals. However, the guide is not the only authority in the team: the expedition members are all specialists too, specialists in their own field of research. They all have some experience with the writing process, either positive or negative. For this reason they need to help each other, for instance by giving each other peer feedback on their texts.

The guide has set the general goal, but the expedition members have to set their own specific goals for their own way to the top. This means that already in the first meeting they are asked to formulate their individual, specific and realistic language learning objectives (see Appendix 1). For example, some students want to know what the structure of a research paper is, what information do they need to put in the introduction and the discussion, in other words, which information elements are put in which part of the text. Others want to formulate concisely. Apart from the general goals of the expedition, they also work on these objectives during the course. This is a learner-centred approach.

The role of the guide is to guide the participants, to be the facilitator, the participants have to do the work themselves. They work on their own texts from their own research project. They help each other by peer reviewing their texts. The guide does not correct their texts, but after the text has been peer reviewed and revised by the author, the guide puts comments in their texts, using an editing code. The students have to revise their own text and can hand in their revised version. All this makes writing both a team effort and an individual effort.

Equipment: what participants need to bring
Apart from a guide, you also need good equipment for a successful expedition. The expedition members need to bring a draft version of their own English text. This should be ready at the start of the course. Working on the language / style *and* the content at the same time is too great a challenge time-wise. Students also need to bring at least two articles from a journal they wish to publish in, texts they consider to be good examples. Another piece of equipment they need to bring is an English-English dictionary. This can be a paper one or an online dictionary. A monolingual one is needed to ensure that unknown words are used in the right context. Related to this is a concordancer, another very helpful piece of equipment, a database of sentences taken from written resources, for example the British National Corpus. In this way you can look at the collocation of the required word. Concordancers are available on the computer or on paper.[1]

Pieces of equipment the institute provides are two textbooks: *Advanced Writing for Graduate Students* and *Practical English Usage.*[2] The first one is a book which, among other types of writing, has information about and tasks on constructing research papers. The second one is a grammar reference book, used for self-study. The last piece of equipment the students need is stamina, endurance to finish the expedition. Most participants have experienced some form of writer's block and need advice on how to overcome that. They can get this from the other team members and from the language trainer. In short, what students need to bring as pieces of equipment are their own text, sample texts from a journal they want to publish in, English-English dictionaries, concordancers, the two textbooks and stamina.

Tools: language aspects
Finally, there are the tools the participants are provided with by the guide and which they need to develop and use themselves. One of the first tools they are provided with are vocabulary learning strategies: they need these to increase their vocabulary. Students are stimulated to start a vocabulary notebook in which they write personally meaningful phrases that help them formulate their thoughts when they are writing. In the case of research papers, participants can organise their vocabulary notebook around the sections of a research paper. For example, phrases they need when writing the introduction, the materials and methods or results section. The choice of format of the notebook is left to the participants but they are strongly advised to make their notebook accessible, in other words know where to find words and phrases when they need them. This is again an aspect of the learner-centred approach.

The students can gather these phrases from their sample texts, one of their pieces of equipment. They are asked to analyse their sample texts for interesting language and structures. For PhD candidates this is a completely new way of reading a journal article. They are used to reading a text for content, but now they need to look at phrases like "several researchers have reported that …", "various methods have been investigated", "results have shown that …". They need to record these in their vocabulary notebook.

Another tool they are given is information about the structure of a research paper. Students sometimes find it difficult to decide what kind of information is put in which section of the text. By analysing sample texts and reading the Swales book they will find out that in the introduction of a research paper, for example, you have the following information elements: showing the importance of a research area, reviewing previous research, establishing a niche, formulating the purpose of the present research and listing the research questions. This information is very helpful in organising their thoughts and in overcoming a possible writer's block.

Next, they are given information about linking words. Many participants only have a limited range available, for example 'because', 'however', and 'nevertheless'. By analysing the sample texts they meet a variety of these linkers, which they can record in their vocabulary

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[1] On *www.lextutor.ca/concordancer/concord_e.html* you can find an example of an online concordancer. For a paper one the *LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* (by Jimmie Hill and Michael Lewis, Thomson Heinle, 1997) can be consulted.

[2] *Advanced Writing for Graduate Students*, John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak, 2nd edition (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004).
Practical English Usage, Michael Swan, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
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notebook. One language aspect learners of English find very confusing is how to use the punctuation marks, especially the use of the comma. Therefore they are asked to read up on that in the grammar reference book, look at its use in the sample texts and do exercises. Another element participants find difficult is using the right register, distinguishing between formal, written academic language and informal spoken English. The language trainer invites them to read academic texts and notice the differences. They are also advised to record examples of informal words and their more formal counterparts in their vocabulary notebook.

Verb tenses are another tool: how to use the correct verb form in the different sections of a research paper. Students tend to use the tenses randomly, but there is a system to it. For example, sentences referring to previous research are usually written with a present perfect or past simple verb form; the description of the method of research usually comes in the past simple passive; and references to tables and figures are always made with the present simple. The final tool the climbers are provided with is information on how to avoid a wordy style of writing. This is a difficult topic. Participants are again asked to analyse the language of their sample texts, they practise revising wordy sentences and are given feedback on their own texts.

In summary, these are seven tools the expedition members are given on their way to reaching the top: vocabulary learning strategies, information on the structure of a research paper, on the use of linking words and punctuation marks, the use of the right register, the use of verb tenses and how to avoid wordiness.

Conclusion
To conclude, the above-mentioned is the description of a seven-week climb to the top, to the publication of research results in an academic journal. For that the PhD candidates need an experienced guide, an English language trainer who plays the role of facilitator. It is essential to have good equipment, equipment in the form of their own text, sample texts, dictionaries, concordancers, textbooks and stamina. The tools they are provided with and which they are strongly encouraged to use are vocabulary learning strategies, the structure of a research paper, linking words and punctuation marks, using the right register, verb tenses and avoiding wordiness.

When reaching the top, the participants look down and reflect on what they have learned. They all say that they now use a more structured approach toward writing up their research; they have become more confident in writing; they have learned strategies on how to develop their own vocabulary; and they know where to find information on language issues. The course has made them more independent learners because they have learned more strategies, which they can also use beyond this course, without a guide.

The description of this expedition gives you an idea of how you can also guide your PhD candidates or other academic writing students to the top. Even though you know that Holland is a flat country, mountain climbing in The Netherlands is possible, provided you have the right guide, equipment and tools.

Appendix 1

Language Learning Objectives

Name: .... Date: ....

If you want to get maximum benefit from this language course you will find it useful to set yourself specific, realistic objectives and to think about how you can achieve them.

Please write in the space below at least two realistic language learning objectives that you want to achieve by the end of the course:

1. ....

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2. ....

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3. ....

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What will you do to help yourself achieve these objectives?

Objective 1:..

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Objective 2: ....

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Objective 3:..

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