
Title	In a different voice: Promises and trials of non-English medium journals
Author(s)	Yew-Jin Lee
Source	<i>Cultural Studies of Science Education</i> , 10(4), 1051-1055
Published by	Springer

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This is the author's accepted manuscript (post-print) of a work that was accepted for publication in the following source:

Lee, Y. J. (2015). In a different voice: Promises and trials of non-English medium journals. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 10(4), 1051-1055. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11422-015-9690-8>

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The final publication is also available at Springer via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11422-015-9690-8>

In a different voice: Promises and trials of non-English medium journals

Yew-Jin Lee

Abstract Various issues confronting science education publications that cater for non-English speaking audiences are explored. With reference to an English-medium journal that the author co-edits, two main conundrums are discussed: (1) How to serve local school practitioners in concrete ways while fulfilling the institutional goals of academia, and (2) the struggle to promote research from non-English speaking contexts against the hegemony of the English language. It is suggested that valuing difference can create much educational value and thereby allow one's science teaching to be interrogated, evolve, and maintain its relevancy.

Keywords publishing · journals · science education · English-medium

Although arising from different regions, contexts, and motivations, the totality of the issues confronting the three journals described in this Forum profile the messy dilemmas that go with managing newly established as well as specialized academic journals (in field, locality or language other than English). Concerns over getting heard in the global marketplace of ideas, of finding acceptance and legitimacy among those communities that matter while being true to one's espoused philosophies of education become deliberations that unfold in the everyday rather than being abstract questions to be tabled at yearly board meetings. As a relatively young journal that many science educators still regard as an outlier, it is therefore befitting and in the interest of *Cultural Studies of Science Education* to explore what it means to occupy the peripheries of scholarly work in a discipline.

Without speculating how so-called fringe research areas (and non-English medium journals) will ever or should become more mainstream however defined, my response here underscores the constant search for productive lines of flight and alternative ways of working in-between the cracks among those that feel marginalized (Lee 2008a). From past editorial

Lead Editor: Carolina Castano-Rodriguez

Y.-J. Lee (✉)

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
e-mail: yewjin.lee@nie.edu.sg

involvement with CSSE and the publication that I currently co-edit—*Pedagogies: A International Journal*—these experiences might offer readers some insight into this “game” of successful publishing in the sense of participating in Wittgenstein’s language games. This analogy is fascinating in that it recalls how games have pre-existing rules and procedures to be followed although these can sometimes be arbitrary and modified by participants either by consensus or force.

To begin, *Pedagogies* differs from those three journals described in the Forum in a few significant ways; primarily, it is a peer-reviewed subscription that has been managed since inception in 2006 by an international academic publisher exclusively for English-medium articles. True to its name, this outlet welcomes both theoretical and empirical articles related to “pedagogies”—a richly multifaceted and almost inexhaustible concept spanning across diverse subject areas, levels of schooling, and social settings where learning of various ilk occurs (Loughran 2013). Its founding editor (Allan Luke) moreover recruited a large pool of international experts who were equally prolific and highly-cited as he into the editorial board. As a society-based publication from my university, it endeavors to be considered worthy enough to be part of the Thompson ISI family of publications, which we admit is a very distant possibility at the moment. Inclusion into this elite grouping entails fulfilling a number of strict conditions and processes that have influenced short- and long-term decisions within *Pedagogies*. These overlap with the many concerns about the value and sustainability of non-English medium journals as I now describe.

Involving and reaching out to school practitioners

All the three non-English-medium science education journals have prioritized involving science teachers as stakeholders and readers. In *Ciência em Tela* (CT), this connection remains the strongest as it has been an on-going commitment to encourage school teachers to be more than just consumers of research but also producers of knowledge. As well, the editors have from the beginning welcomed different products of research and evaluation to broaden participation and ownership. Keeping a close link between teachers and the research community is likewise honored (though severely challenged) in *Recherches en Didactiques des Sciences et des Technologies* (RDST) while for reasons attributed to globalization and internationalization, teacher involvement in *Enseñanza de las Ciencias* (EC) has been so badly eroded that readership among classroom practitioners is said to be low. In part, shifts in the journal editorial process as well as changing usage of research by teachers mirror subtle changes in their evolution: RDST and EC have moved decisively in wanting to take a more international perspective. Being successful in the latter, as has been the experience of so many other journals, has usually been associated with changes in readership, editorial boards, and above all encouraging quality manuscript submissions that transcend state or regional relevancies. But the most far-reaching decision perhaps, has oftentimes meant forsaking writing in one’s mother tongue as I describe later.

For *Pedagogies*, working with practitioners is likewise an implicit intention although in practice it is negligible; unless teachers have demonstrable expertise in a certain field, they would not be invited as manuscript reviewers nor are they well-represented as authors. Being

a generalist publication catering to a wide spectrum of interests, methods, and paradigms has furthermore made the notion of “audience” especially difficult to spell out with accuracy. The discourses and accepted forms of representation within *Pedagogies* are chiefly derived from/for academia—perhaps the default mode—although we have had more experimental representations in recent articles such as interview formats. Thus, it is somewhat ironic that a journal such as ours, which attempts to capture the “many instructional innovations that were occurring that fell under the radar of policymakers” (paraphrased from an online interview with the founding editor Allan Luke) (see Luke 2012) has not been successful in speaking to the very people that it has originally pledged to support:

academic journals are never really teacher-ready, teacher-accessible although the journal[*Pedagogies*] tries to make theoretically coherent and scientifically defensible research available and accessible for classroom practitioners (paraphrased from an online interview with Allan Luke).

For the science education community, such divergences between imagined and real audiences are a real threat, which in my opinion has grown ever wider over the decades. Compared to my reading of early articles in the major journals in science education, current manuscripts are noticeably lengthier as well as more theoretically diverse, often bringing in ideas from unfamiliar disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and philosophy. While this new sophistication is to be applauded and represents a genuine advancement in educational knowledge, one wonders if this has inadvertently made it alienating for teachers especially novices with the greatest need for such wisdom? If educational science is a normative endeavor, should not those that require most help be entitled to the unimpeded access to useful knowledge? As the three Forum articles have pointed out, teachers are perhaps the best people to notice and critique the “enacted curriculum or what goes on in classrooms, the face-to-face interactions, relationships and exchanges that are so ubiquitous to the extent that they are seen as less important or less interesting even” (paraphrased from an online interview with Allan Luke). In my institute and in the local Ministry of Education, there are now personnel that are employed to perform the work of translation, to render in more intelligible form useful research outcomes that could otherwise forever remain hidden or unread. Be that as it may, while teachers are acknowledged as important producers and consumers of research, their involvement within the circuits of knowledge in the major journals are being gradually diminished—researchers are writing for their colleagues more than ever. More than ever, we therefore have to re-examine the implications of Aristotle’s *phronesis* and Joseph Schwab’s “the practical” as the science education community considers what knowledge is of most worth and how should we teach it well for diverse learners.

The hegemony of the English Language in publishing

All three journals described in the Forum cater for readers and professionals in their native languages and thereby fulfil a genuine need. We also are fully cognizant of the hegemony of publishing in English that can severely curtail one’s agency. There are no easy solutions here within science education; the journals with the highest impact according to common measures of effectiveness and productivity in higher education already cater exclusively to

English-speaking audiences. It is as though publications using English immediately secures membership into a wide-ranging network that transcends national boundaries, a long-term goal shared by *ET*. The board of *CSSE* has attempted to mitigate some of the worst effects of this hegemony by allowing the option of printing an extended executive summary in one's native language. Given that Internet search engines are the predominant mode used nowadays to find relevant material, the abstracts appearing in English in *CT* and *EC*, and in three languages in *RDST* are surely pragmatic decisions. Other creative possibilities that have recently been mooted include writing in non-standard English, an endorsement of the value of communicating and applying new knowledge regardless of its cultural or demographic origins (Montgomery 2013).

A tally of the home institutions of all the 80 first-authors who published in *Pedagogies* over 2012 to 2013 is revealing: 95% hail from states where English is an official language (e.g., UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong). Whether this lopsidedness is a reflection of research alignment with the journal's aims, better access and opportunities or linguistic mastery is difficult to ascertain but it is likely that all these elements are co-extensive. On this account, it is clear that *Pedagogies* has a distinct advantage that the three Forum journals do not yet enjoy—we invite and cater for the English-speaking academic world.

This snapshot of inequality also alludes to the fact there are complex and interrelated reasons for the paucity of scholarly work coming out from Asia ranging from political instability, high poverty levels, lack of development capacity, and problems of multiple ethnicities, languages, and political economies (Lee 2008b). Despite having populations conversant in English in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, this has not translated into high outputs of educational research (Lee 2010). With less than ten first-authors over 2012-2013 calling Asia their home, *Pedagogies* has a long way in fulfilling its original intent to improve inequalities in academic publishing:

[We] wanted to get to Asian, North American and UK (in that order), teacher educators, researchers, system bureaucrats and to an extent teachers as the audiences (paraphrased from an online interview with Allan Luke).

Valuing difference to create educational value

The job of managing a journal is not unlike that of an aspiring gallery owner; “Which local artists do we support given our limited resources—those who have made their mark that the public(s) appreciates or do we take a chance on *avant garde* unknowns? How can we anticipate taste or should we seed radical trends or movements? Who are my rivals and allies in the business? What is quality?” The three journals mentioned in the Forum as indeed any other journal that hopes for organizational longevity will have to wrestle with these kinds of conundrums. For example, Open Access will indubitably change the economics and speed of publishing and global center-margin relationships will undergo profound changes in the near

term according to Allan Luke. If all that I have said here has sounded rather grim, I want to end by stating that I see much value in appraising high-quality research that are similar but not quite such as from non-English-medium journals or from settings that are culturally alien. This is because teaching in classrooms, largely, adopts relatively familiar and common processes around the world barring outward differences in social norms, resource provisioning, and governance. For me, it is not so much a (mundane) matter of trying to understand the original language of enactment from an article but of a deeper and more exciting translation into (hybrid) forms that one can employ to interrogate one's own teaching contexts. This rhizomatic critique that respects difference as well as uniformity is perhaps a highly fecund means of making science education relevant for each generation of learners:

Genuine learning according to Deleuze entails the comprehension of the 'new in its newness, as a structured field of potential metamorphic forces rather than a pre-formed body of knowledge to be mastered' (Bogue 2004b, p. 341). Said another way, education is nothing but thinking differently, an eternal return (i.e., production) in Nietzschean terminology. (Lee 2008a, p. 924)

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Author Biography

Yew-Jin Lee was trained as a secondary school Biology teacher in Singapore. Currently, he is a science teacher-educator at the NIE with research interests in curriculum studies, scientific ways of knowing, and informal science learning environments. He also brings to his research sociocultural concepts of learning as well as theoretical insights from the social sciences and humanities. Recent publications include articles on design-based inquiry, implementation research and “*The world of science education: Handbook of research in Asia*” (Sense Publishers, 2010) and “*The eternal return: Reproduction and change in complex*

activity systems” (with W.-M. Roth and L. Boyer) (Berlin: Lehmanns Media, 2008). Apart from being the co-editor of *Pedagogies: An International Journal* (Taylor & Francis), Yew-Jin serves on the editorial boards of *Studies in Science Education* and *Research in Science Education*.