

# “The stigmatizing effect of Goffman’s stigma label: a response to John Flowerdew”

Christine Pearson Casanave

*Temple University, Japan Campus, Tokyo, Japan*

---

## Abstract

The way we use words to discuss complex phenomena such as writing for scholarly publication matters greatly, particularly if we are distinguishing between EAL writers and English L1 gatekeepers. In this response to Flowerdew, I argue that using Goffman’s concept of stigma to discuss possible discrimination against EAL writers serves only to oversimplify complex issues and to obscure the great diversity within groups that get lumped under the labels of EAL scholarly writers (the “stigmatized”) and L1 writers, journal editors, and reviewers (the “normals”). The realities of scholarly publishing for all writers need to be addressed in less dichotomizing ways.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* EAL scholarly writers; Stigma; Labels; Writing for publication; Gatekeepers; Writing problems

---

John Flowerdew (2008) is to be praised for his obviously strong support of EAL writers and their efforts to publish their scholarly work in international English-language journals. As he and others have pointed out, scholars world wide who publish in their L2 of English represent a numerical majority who continue to struggle with minority status relative to L1 scholars. To help redress this imbalance, many of us, both L1 and L2 users of English, seek ways to assist all aspiring scholarly writers in their efforts to share their work as broadly as possible, thus exposing work that would otherwise remain local to the attention of international audiences. For better or for worse, English seems to be the lingua franca in these endeavors for the foreseeable future.

Real and perceived discrimination against EAL scholarly writers is a blight on our field. The problem needs to be recognized and rectified, particularly by those in charge of scholarly gatekeeping. However, in addressing the problem of discrimination against EAL scholars, Flowerdew uses Goffman’s concept of stigma (1969, as cited in Flowerdew, 2008) to set EAL scholars apart from “normals”—L1 gatekeepers such as journal editors and reviewers. Although he notes that many gatekeepers these days are EALs themselves, the dichotomy of the stigmatized (EAL writers) and the “normals” forms the heart of his discussion. The comparison foregrounds images of EAL writers that are unsavory at best, and inaccurate and paradoxically even more stigmatizing at worst. The dichotomy and the labels thus end up doing more harm than good.

Caveats and scare quotes notwithstanding, we are presented in this article with Goffman’s characterizations of the stigmatized in ways that I believe should not be applied to aspiring scholarly EAL writers. The initial quote that

---

*E-mail address:* [casanave@redshift.com](mailto:casanave@redshift.com)

Flowerdew cites to set up his argument uses the following language from Goffman to describe stigmatized people and how they are viewed: “persons of a less desirable kind... bad... dangerous... weak... tainted... discounted... a failing... a shortcoming... a handicap...” (p. 79). Flowerdew continues: “While some might see it as an exaggeration, it would seem that this description might very well be applied to EAL writers who have difficulty with producing written English at an acceptable level” (p. 79). Without denying that a problem exists, I did not see this so much as an exaggeration, but a misapplied analogy, an unhelpful and oversimplified way to talk about a complex problem.

Flowerdew continues to review Goffman, referring next to Goffman’s three types of stigma: “First is physical deformity. Second is deviation in personal characteristics (being perceived as weak willed, domineering, rigid in one’s beliefs, or dishonest, for example), .... Third is ‘tribal stigma’ (race, nationality, religion). *If we consider EAL writers, then we might say that they fit into the second and third of these categories*” (pp. 79–80, emphasis added by me). In the same paragraph we read that the stigma of “nonstandard English,” for example, “may be perceived as indicative of some negative characteristic such as laziness, lack of education, low intelligence, etc.,” and that because being a nonnative writer is something that one “cannot discard at will,” it is also considered a “tribal stigma” (p. 80).

We know that Flowerdew is not suggesting that he himself holds these views, but I began to wonder just who he believes is doing the perceiving in the passive-voiced sentence quoted above. His discussion conveys the impression that this particularly insidious form of discrimination is widespread. It may be, but I am skeptical. In my 35 year career in L2 education and my years of editing and reviewing for numerous journals, I cannot recall hearing EAL scholarly writers referred to in this strongly worded way, even though some of my EAL colleagues have told me of specific instances in which they have felt and in fact been discriminated against. At editorial board meetings and conference presentations on publishing that I have attended, talk centers not on aspiring authors’ low intelligence or laziness, but more on how to help *all* authors with writing problems, including language problems. Many of these problems are likely to be attributed to an author’s lack of experience in writing or to his or her hasty submission of a manuscript in the push to publish. This pressure can cause L1 and L2 authors alike to prematurely submit a piece that needs editing for language problems or that is “undertheorized and underanalyzed, one that seems to follow the adage ‘have data will publish’...” (Leki, 2003, p. 108).

Likewise, in Flowerdew’s (2001) own interview study of eleven journal editors of international language-oriented journals, the vast majority of comments about problems in submissions applied to L1 writers of English as well as EAL writers, as the editors themselves pointed out. They reported no discrimination against NNS writers except in the positive sense—editors reported going out of their way to help NNS authors prepare promising manuscripts for publication. The editors also had trouble with the NS-NNS (“stigmatized”-“normal”) dichotomy, preferring to refer to authors in more complex and nuanced ways. What we do not know from this study is specifically how the editors viewed the problems of submissions written by L1 English writers, as such questions were not part of Flowerdew’s interviews.

It is true, according to the testimonies of some journal editors, that not all reviewers are friendly or helpful to either EAL or L1 authors. Some reviewers comment so insensitively about a manuscript that the review cannot be transmitted verbatim to an author, with the result that an editor needs to choose carefully which reviewers to send submitted manuscripts to (McKay, 2003). Although I do not know the standards in fields such as science and engineering, in second language education professional courtesy is something editors expect from their reviewers given that reviews tend to be sent to authors in unedited form. Yet as Ilona Leki, co-editor of *Journal of Second Language Writing* noted, editors sometimes receive reviews that are “harsh and harshly worded” (Leki, 2003, p. 106), causing complaints from some authors, and even accusations of discrimination (see Li & Flowerdew, 2007, from another context). However, both McKay and Leki refer to authors in general, and do not single out EAL authors as being targeted for harsh remarks. I can guarantee from my own experience as an author that being insulted by a reviewer is not an experience reserved for EAL writers. The stigmatized-normal analogy breaks down here.

Unfortunately, getting insensitive reviews is part of the publishing game (one that I believe more and more editors are trying to rectify). The job for all of us upon getting discouraging reviews is to take a break to regroup and then go back to revising if revising is truly what is needed. Novice scholars need guidance in learning about this uncomfortable process—an especially important job for graduate advisors and supervisors. Once novice authors have a foot in the door, they can begin to help make changes in the system. As Kubota (2003, p. 65) has pointed out, “it is advisable for a writer to follow closely the conventions at least in the initial stages of writing for publication in order to gain the cultural capital that will facilitate her or his initiation into the academic community.” Kubota (2003) is not unusual in seeking many ways to get help polishing a manuscript before submitting it (see also Li’s 2006 case study of Chinese physics student Chen, who sought help *after* a reviewer suggested he do so, and then successfully published).

However, not all authors, either L1 or EAL writers, do this, partly because locating truly competent peer readers or copyeditors can admittedly be difficult. Therefore, future discussions by journal editorial boards will need to continue addressing questions about what the responsibilities of editors and reviewers are in polishing a submitted manuscript. However, some L1 and EAL authors mistakenly feel that it is a journal's responsibility to proofread and edit work that has been submitted. Leki noted that in her role as editor she has sometimes felt "abused by authors by being placed...in the role not just of doorwoman [gatekeeper] but of textual maid or housekeeper" by authors who do not attend to the "pedestrian concerns" such as citation and referencing conventions and spell-checking (Leki, 2003, p. 108). But the problem of sloppiness applies to writers regardless of their L1. It is thus our responsibility to reflect on whether we have submitted a draft prematurely, but if not, to communicate to editors if we truly feel we have been judged unfairly. Again, the dichotomy of the stigmatized and the normal does not apply because of the complex realities of the publishing process (e.g., see Lillis & Curry, 2006).

I am also curious as to what Flowerdew means when he refers to "poor language" as a reason why some manuscripts submitted for publication are rejected. Assuming a baseline intelligibility, a noncontroversial criterion, this could result from any number of things: easily fixed problems such as articles, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and verb tenses. Some of these problems stand out as typical of the writing of some L2 users of English (as they would with me if I were writing in my L2), but not all. It could also refer to larger rhetorical issues such as unexpected or unclear organization and flow of ideas and lack of familiarity with genre conventions. It could further refer to awkward and difficult-to-process syntax and inappropriate lexicon. Most of these problems might result from a writer's L2 status and be recognized as such, but many also characterize the writing of L1 users of English (Lunsford, 2008). They can stem from insufficient control of the language, muddy thinking, inexperience with writing in general and with scholarly genres in particular, and so forth—all problems that L1 writers share with L2 writers. Some of the worst writing I have reviewed, and some of the most difficult to revise because the language is superficially "standard" has been done by L1 users who may have little experience with scholarly writing, little flare for words, and no appreciation for the realities of the revision process. The point is, "poor language" will not do as a construct with which to make a case for applying Goffman's concept of stigma to EAL writers in this argument without further clarification.

Let me conclude this response by doing some perspective-taking that is designed to look at the stigma labels from the other side. I ask those who may have perceived problems with the writing of EAL scholars, including journal editors and reviewers: If *you* were submitting a scholarly piece of writing for publication in *your* L2, assuming you are not a balanced bilingual, what would you expect from your own L2 writing? What standards would you set for yourself? First, how polished do you believe your L2 article needs to be before you submit it? What kinds of help would you seek in polishing it? Second, how do you expect reviewers to react to your writing, if it differs in any of the ways I mentioned above from expectations for a particular journal? Why would we not expect comments on our inadequate control of the language? The point is, how would we want a reviewer to critique our language problems? And third, as an L2 writer trying to get published, how do you expect to be perceived as a writer? How would you react to being described as stigmatized in the language of Goffman? If this is not how you would want to be described, what characterizations of you as an L2 writer would you prefer?

Let us continue the thought experiment: For EAL writers who feel they have been discriminated against, here are my perspective-taking questions for you: If you were a manuscript reviewer for a journal in your L1, say Chinese, what would your reaction be to an article submitted for publication that was written by an L2 user of Chinese—one that was intelligible but that exhibited incomplete control of (for example) knowledge of Chinese characters, Chinese syntax, and expected genre features? What would you infer about the author of such an article? Does Goffman's notion of stigma apply to L2 writers of Chinese in this case? In all these cases, I am guessing that the "stigma-normal" labels would be as inappropriate for L2 Chinese writers as they are to EAL writers.

To close, Flowerdew is not unaware of how his article might be misread. The caveats he lists in section 5 confirm that. The caveats express in *his* words why Goffman's notion of stigma might be misapplied to EAL scholarly writers. The point I wish to make is that this way of characterizing the problems and difficulties that EAL scholarly writers have in their publishing efforts pushes at the boundaries of good taste and hinders scholarly argument. There are ways we can discuss these issues without the dichotomies and the stigmatizing labels. I also find it counter-productive in that Goffman's notion of stigma (unintentionally, to be sure) isolates further a very active and important group of novice and experienced EAL writers. It serves as well to lump a very diverse crowd of "normals"—journal editors and reviewers—into one gatekeeping category, and neglects the fact that there are many "literacy brokers" who mediate

the complex process of preparing work for publication (Lillis & Curry, 2006). The resulting simplification of very complex social, political, and intellectual phenomena (Leki's, 2003, "tangled web" of professional writing) does not help solve the very real problems experienced by some EAL (and L1) writers.

## References

- Flowerdew, J. (2001). Attitudes of journal editors to nonnative speaker contributions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(1), 121–150.
- Flowerdew, J. (2008). Scholarly writers who use English as an Additional Language: what can Goffman's "Stigma" tell us? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7(2), 77–86.
- Kubota, R. (2003). Striving for original voice in publication?: a critical reflection. In C. P. Casanave, & S. Vandrick (Eds.), *Writing for scholarly publication: Behind the scenes in language education* (pp. 61–69). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Leki, I. (2003). Tangled webs: complexities of professional writing. In C. P. Casanave, & S. Vandrick (Eds.), *Writing for scholarly publication: Behind the scenes in language education* (pp. 103–112). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Li, Y. (2006). A doctoral student of physics writing for international publication: a sociopolitically-oriented case study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25, 456–478.
- Li, Y., & Flowerdew, J. (2007). Shaping Chinese novice scientists' manuscripts for publication. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(2), 100–117.
- Lillis, T., & Curry, M. J. (2006). Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars: Interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English-medium texts. *Written Communication*, 23(1), 3–35.
- McKay, S. (2003). Reflections on being a gatekeeper. In C. P. Casanave, & S. Vandrick (Eds.), *Writing for scholarly publication: Behind the scenes in language education* (pp. 91–102). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.