

## The long journey to my first publication in a reputable international journal: An autoethnographic account

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This study chronicles my long journey toward publication in reputable international journals, detailing the challenges encountered throughout the process of article preparation and publication. Using an autoethnography approach involving personal reflection, I aim to document my journey from selecting the research topic to providing a self-budget for publication. I seek to offer insights into the challenges, encompassing title formulation, participant recruitment, manuscript preparation, submission, revision, and article processing charge payment.

### Introduction

Publishing research results in journals has become a mandatory requirement for all lecturers. This obligation, widely adopted by most higher education institutions around the world, serves as a path to express ideas and opinions in the form of research (Welledawit, 2018) and as a strategy to enhance the university's accreditation and secure research funding (Wagner, 2012). According to Welledawit (2018), the failure to publish research results could lead to job termination for lecturers. As a lecturer at a small college in Jambi, Indonesia, lacking publication experience, the process of preparing and publishing manuscripts for reputable international journals (RIJ) presents a significant challenge and a long journey for me. Engaging in unfamiliar tasks never experienced before poses a significant challenge for most academics. This journey involves tasks ranging from selecting and formulating an appropriate topic based on current trends, to paying an article processing charge (APC) for publication.

Generally, the lack of success among Indonesian researchers and researchers in non-English speaking countries can be attributed to diverse factors, including poor academic English proficiency, difficulty in searching for appropriate references, poor quality of the manuscripts, and the relevance of topics to targeted international journals (Gusmuliana et al., 2022; Purwanto et al., 2021). To increase publication productivity among Indonesian researchers and academics in RIJ, planning should commence well in advance (Gusmuliana et al., 2022). First, scholars should be able to select and formulate topics based on international trending issues (Adnan et al., 2021), which constitutes the first step in preparation (Wagner, 2012), followed by writing manuscripts in an academically rigorous manner to ensure readability by researchers and academics worldwide (Karimnia, 2013; Kijak, 2014). Additionally, utilising the research field vocabulary effectively and organising ideas logically are essential for ensuring readers' comprehension (Elton, 2010).

Numerous studies have explored the challenges of publication in RIJ. For example, research has explored factors hindering publication (Arsyad & Arono, 2016), Indonesian

students' publication problems (Gusmuliana et al., 2022), challenges encountered by Vietnamese doctoral students (Hoang & Florence, 2022), the low publication rate in Poland (Kijak, 2014), publication challenges of Hong Kong doctoral students (Kwan, 2010), the long road to publication (De Lange, 2014), early publication experiences (Merga et al., 2018), publication challenges of African doctoral students (Mouton, 2011), inhibiting factors of doctoral students in publishing articles (Purwanto et al., 2021), and publication challenges for doctoral students in North Cyprus (Shamsi & Osam, 2022). Despite this extensive research, exploring publication experiences using autoethnography remains relatively rare, with only a few studies such as Banerjee (2022), and Dashper (2015) offering insights into this area. Therefore, I encouraged myself to compose an autoethnographic account of my publication journey, starting from formulating a research title to eventually attaining my first international publication (Indrayadi et al., 2021).

## Literature review

### Reputable international journals

A reputable international journal (RIJ) is an academic research journal that contains quality articles authored by researchers from diverse countries around the world, acting to disseminate research results to international audiences, in a specific field or diverse range of fields. This type of journal is published in a United Nations official language (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) (Sihite et al., 2020; UN, n.d.), generally concerning a specific discipline (Yanifika & Nurdiana, 2023) and published by credible universities and publishers (Indonesian *Ministerial Decree of education, research and technology*, 2024). Moreover, the manuscript must meet high academic writing standards to enable readers understand the research results (Wardhana & Hindarto, 2022), possesses a good reputation, indexed on Scopus, Web of Science, and Thompson Reuters (Minger et al., 2017), and usually need at least three to six months for the stages of selecting appropriate journal, submission, peer-review, revision, and finally an acceptance or rejection decision (Purwanto et al., 2021).

The RIJ reputation can be assessed through factors such as citation metrics, number of subscribers, geographic locations of authors and publisher, and composition of journal editorial board (Brice & Bligh, 2004), as well as the use of international languages that allow researchers from all over the world to read and understand directly (Bucher, 2018). Such journals are consistently published through a professional selection process and managed by a trusted publisher (Donovan, 2010), providing an equitable opportunity for every author to get published (Rouault, 2014). An RIJ also provides standardised peer reviews by experts in their research fields (Masten & Ashcraft, 2017), a practice that has emerged since the 20th century for selecting the best qualified manuscripts, so that they can be read and cited by researchers all over the world (Banerjee, 2022). Banerjee (2022) further asserted the importance of involving experts from a particular field of study in reviewing the submitted manuscripts, to avoid biased or uninformed comments and maintain journal quality.

## **Publication policy in Indonesia**

Publication is mandatory for academicians teaching at higher education levels (Weldedawit, 2018) and a fundamental aspect of an academic career (Donovan, 2010; Merga et al., 2018). Publication is a key step towards research being recognised by research communities (Wagner, 2012), achieving a personal reputation (Banks, 2018), securing promotion through the ranks of assistant professor, associate professor, and professor (Weldedawit, 2018), and enhancing a university's local, regional and world rankings (Hanafi, 2011; Lillis et al., 2010). Moreover, publication is one of the indicators that measure an academic's research productivity (McNutt et al., 2018). According to a study conducted by Hassan et al. (2012) during 2000-2008, the productivity of Indonesian researchers was left behind by Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. To address this issue, the Indonesian government obliges academics to publish articles in RIJ as a follow-up to the Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 12 of 2012 on higher education. The law stipulates that lecturers are obliged to conduct research (including publication) besides teaching and community service duties. However, the policy remains less effective in improving rankings of Indonesian publications.

Despite an increasing trend in numbers of publications, Indonesia remains in a second position behind Malaysia, based on the Science and Technology Index portal (Amelia & Rahmaida, 2017). Similarly, data from Scopus spanning from 2010 to 2016 corroborates this ranking, with Indonesia in second place behind Malaysia (Lukman, 2016). This situation may be attributed to a lack of funding support and incentives for publication provided by stakeholders (Sulistiyo et al., 2020), as well as the poor quality of articles and their rejection because of a lack of knowledge of RIJ preferences (Gusmuliana et al., 2022).

To improve publication rankings, the Indonesian government has required each university to facilitate students' from undergraduate to doctoral levels publishing of their research results (Indonesia Publication Circular, 2019). The circular requires students in doctoral programs to publish their research results in an RIJ as requirement of finishing doctoral program. This obligation has been discussed by Gusmuliana et al. (2022) and Jayadinata et al. (2022) also argued that RIJ publication is a prerequisite during the doctoral program. Doctoral students are expected to position themselves as the first author (Mason & Merga, 2018). The RIJ obligation also became a special prerequisite for professorship candidates in Indonesia (Indonesian Ministerial Decree of Education, Research and Technology, 2024). Professorial candidates must publish an article in RIJ (Adnan & Purwo, 2022). The Minister of Education, Research, and Technology also required academics in professorial positions to publish research results in RIJ at least once in every three-year period (Indonesian Director General of Higher Education, 2021). This promotion of RIJ publication has led to more extensive investigation of factors that inhibit such publishing (Purwanto et al., 2021)

Mok and Wei (2008) have drawn attention to the importance of publication in an environment of international competitiveness, that has driven university stakeholders

worldwide to work hard to develop the research rankings of their institutions. For example, pressures to publish research results were also implemented in Taiwan (Mok, 2016), aiming to achieve world-class university status, ranking, and prestige (Chien, 2019). Chien (2019) also revealed that international publication enables academics to gather higher credits than national publications. Thus, it is important to foster a publication culture (Kijak, 2014).

### **Steps in preparing and publishing articles**

Several steps need to be considered by authors when publishing their research results in journals, including title formulation, methodology used, writing, submission, revision, and APC payment. Title formulation is the first step that authors must consider before starting their fieldwork because eventually it may significantly affect article acceptance (Indrayadi, 2023) and it guides research outcomes (Ameen et al, 2018). The title can guide readers to comprehend the content easily (Akman, 2013). A study carried out by Qaseem and Zayid (2019) on writing a research proposal project recommended that supervisors seriously guide the students as new researchers in formulating research article titles to ensure satisfactory scientific results.

Regarding methodology usage, it refers to the research design used by the researchers to reach scientific findings and conclusions, which usually consist of research design, participants, instrument, data collection and analysis. The selection needs to be based on the research problems being investigated (Cresswell, 2014). Research methodology directly relates to research questions, purposes, data collection, and analysis (Laverty, 2018). Methodology guides researchers in determining a sampling strategy (Johnson & Christensen, 2014), how the data are collected from the participants, analysed, and interpreted based on the research types (Kothari, 2004). Thus, university stakeholders need to provide training related to methodology to develop novice researchers' knowledge before they conduct research (Alfakih, 2017).

The third is manuscript preparation. In preparing the manuscript, researchers must possess strong English writing skills because most international journals in the world publish in English (Hyland, 2015). Having high ability in writing for publication can help researchers to disseminate research findings to both audiences and the scientific community (Aurora et al., 2022; Uzuner, 2008). In doing so, authors must be very aware that writing is a process of communicating with readers (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008). To further this purpose, academic writing training must be undertaken to ensure the writing competency of the researchers (Qasem & Zayid, 2019; Wenger, 2004). Specifically, a study conducted by Wardhana and Hindarto (2022) found that academic writing classes provided by institutions also help students as novice researchers develop the skills needed to write academic articles.

The fourth is manuscript submission, which often entails knowledge of how to submit an article via an online submission system. When submitting an article to a targeted journal through an online system, authors should be aware of the manuscript submission

requirements such as cover letter, title, authors' name, affiliation name, and bibliography (Wagner, 2012). Although submission requirements are usually outlined in a journal's author guidelines or instructions (Morisano et al., 2017), authors may need local advice or further reading about requirements, before submitting their manuscripts.

The fifth is manuscript revision. This step is an obligation that authors may often encounter after receiving review results from the chief editor or reviewers, based on the policy of the targeted journals. Revision involves correcting errors to meet the standards set by the editor, such as presentation of method details and referencing (Abt, 1992), which can improve the quality of the articles. Rouault (2014) maintained that revision helps authors produce qualified manuscripts that meet the standards of targeted journals.

In addition, APC payment refers to a publication fee charged to the authors to cover article publishing costs, including editorial and review processes, or to make their article available for open access in fee-charging journals, and enable the publisher to operate profitably. APCs are usually paid when an article has been accepted for publication (Oshakbayev et al., 2021). However, some journals require the authors to pay the fees at the time of submission (Tewari, 2022). Therefore, the fees need to be provided for by authors when they decide to submit their articles to journals that require publication fees.

## **Method**

An autoethnographic approach was adopted for my study, being a type of qualitative method research that examines autobiographical data of an individual, through a narrative (Roberson & Alexander, 2022). The narrative of individual autobiography is a description of one's past experiences, not the future, according to Boyle and Parry (2014), who suggested that the method can also investigate and explore individuals' taboo topics. Specifically, the researcher himself or herself is the object of the study in autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). This type of qualitative research methodology can support researchers to explore their personal experiences in terms of challenges, pain, and heartbreak (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Tham, 2020). This method was chosen to present my challenges in formulating the title, recruiting participants, writing a manuscript, submitting to the journal system, and preparing for an article processing charge after finishing my English language doctoral at Jambi University, Indonesia.

Engaging in self-reflection through autoethnography enables us to evaluate and make changes to what we have done in the past and become a foundation for future work (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Howard, 2016). However, when conducting autoethnography for self-reflection, researchers must consider ethical principles to avoid bias (Chen, 2021). Autoethnographers are required to express their personal experiences that are evocative and interesting, in-depth and honestly, according to what they have experienced (Banerjee, 2022; Custer, 2014; Dashper, 2015), positing themselves as research participants (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005). Therefore, I decided to use this methodology due to its usefulness in exploring my challenges of first publication experiences to RIJ.

## Findings and discussion

In this part, I present the challenges encountered in preparing and publishing the article, after deciding on international publication. I categorised these challenges into six themes, including title formulation, participant recruitment, manuscript preparation, submission, revision, and article processing charge (APC) payment. These themes serve as the basics for my exploration of challenges faced by authors.

### Title formulation

This first theme focuses on identifying appropriate issues to be formulated as the research title. This step is very important as it helps guide researchers in their literature review and choosing a methodology. In this theme, I faced difficulty in formulating the title for my research despite making considerable effort to do so. I reflected:

I struggled to find relevant trending issues in reputable international journals despite having read many published articles.

I reiterate here that I worked hard to learn about appropriate contemporary issues for my research, then formulate it to attain acceptance by a journal. This finding is in line with Ameen et al. (2018), who maintained that reading previous studies is the best way to undertake title formulation. Similarly, Arsyad (2018) highlighted that Indonesian scholars overcome the problem by reading similar published articles that can help in selecting and formulating the topic (Lei, 2009) and acting as a guide in conducting the research and publications (Buckle et al., 2010; Davis & Tschudin, 2007). Bancong et al. (2021), who investigated trends with research topics in physics education, suggested that researchers design a map of related research topics as guide in determining research titles in RIJ. The comprehension of relevant topics must be a priority for developing research methodology (Wintersberger & Saunders, 2020).

The challenge of title formulation based on the trend issues led me to discuss with my colleagues who have the same research concern as me to overcome the problem, then offer them to conduct collaborative research.

I decided to have a brief discussion with my co-authors who have similar pronunciation teaching experiences about the possibility of researching silent letters [in English words]. We decided that the topic is interesting and appropriate to be published in reputable international journals.

Discussing relevant research topics with researchers who have research experience is very important in determining and formulating the topic. This strategy was advanced by Ameen et al. (2018), who investigated novice library and information science researchers difficulties in formulating a research topic. Discussion was first done with supervisors, to have their advice before deciding the topic for the research. Similar findings were obtained by Olalere et al. (2013), who examined "the interactions between task, belief, resource and knowledge in determining students' choice[s]" of dissertation topics.

## **Participant recruitment**

Participants are an important element of research success. The relationship between researchers and the participants influences the success of the research (Howard & Hammond, 2019). Therefore, researchers need to have the ability to decide effectively on the individuals or a group of people who will be selected as the participants in research.

I convinced the students about their important involvement in my research to gain rich information about their challenges in recognising English silent letters. Gathering the data from participants is not an easy way. Therefore, I need to build a good relationship with my research participants.

As I wished to collect rich data on participants' different perspectives, a trusting relationship with participants had to be developed. This trusting relationship should be built before administering the interview and maintained during the research (Hall & Kulig, 2004). Buckle et al. (2010) used direct conversations with the participants to ensure their participation in the research they were conducting. Ramanayake (2020) highlighted that one way to convince participants to engage in research is by allowing them to invite their colleagues to accompany them when presenting responses to an interviewer.

After participants became willing to participate in my research, the consent forms were given in accord with research ethics. I wrote:

I asked students who were involved in my study to read and sign consent forms that contained participation agreements. It was administered to the students before the interview as the requirement of gathering data from the participants.

Providing consent forms for selected participants is very important before conducting research. It is in line with Buckle et al. (2010) who asked the selected participants to sign consent forms before starting to take data, as evidence of their participating voluntarily in the research. Indrayadi (2023) also revealed that consent forms were provided before interviewing the participants. The consent form is a permission from participants to involve them in a study, a voluntary agreement to be interviewed in the study being conducted (Dahal & Luitel, 2022; Indrayadi et al., 2021; Indrayadi, 2023), and a taking of responsibility for the data expressed. The explanation needs to be done to ensure the participants' involvement in the study.

## **Manuscript preparation**

In preparing and publishing a manuscript, English writing skills are an important factor because English is so widely used by international journals all over the world as the language for presenting research. However, I faced difficulties when I tried to write my research results in the form of an article.

Although I have many ideas in my mind after gathering the data from participants, it is hard for me to start writing the manuscript. This problem is caused by a lack of skills in

English academic writing, for example how to make a good and coherent paragraph. I overcame this problem by asking my colleagues to proofread the manuscript.

As I aimed to prepare the writing draft after taking the interview data from research participants, I could not express my ideas and opinions in English grammatically and academically. This circumstance is similar to the observations from Kijak (2014), who noted that Polish doctoral students in social sciences and humanities solved similar English language problems by sending their manuscripts to native English speakers or experts for editing. Chong (2020) reported his PhD by publication experiences, revealed that he was guided by director of the program to complete the research results for publication. Kijak (2014) suggested that Polish doctoral students be given research writing courses to help them prepare their articles.

The importance of having high standard academic English writing for publication is due to the impression that chief editors and reviewers have no tolerance for low English writing skills (Huang, 2010). Therefore, researchers are required to have a high ability in transforming the rhetorical structure of their first language into English, to create qualified articles (Wardhana & Hindarto, 2022; Hill & Thabet, 2021).

### **Manuscript submission**

Submitting a manuscript to targeted journal very often requires knowledge of an online submission form. I wrote:

I encouraged myself to submit manuscript to our targeted journals, but I failed after several submission attempts. This failure made me ask for help of a third author to submit it because of his experience in sending manuscripts to local journals using digital platforms.

My lack of knowledge about online journal submission systems made me postpone my intent to submit the manuscript by myself, because it was difficult for me. This challenge forced me to call my team to help me. This experience was similar to findings by Gusmuliana (2022) that novice authors ask someone to help them to submit their articles via online journal submission systems. Hidayat (2024) observed that doctoral students asked article writing services to make submission of their articles. Involving other scholars to submit the article is due to a lack of RIJ submission skills, that may include data items from the author such as cover letter, authors' names, affiliations, and bios (Wagner, 2012).

The next step is checking the manuscript status through an online journal submission system.

After the manuscript was submitted, I reminded the third author to check the status of our manuscript regularly.

Checking the status of articles in OJS can only be done by the corresponding authors who have usernames and passwords for logging into the targeted journal (Israel, 2014). With his experience our third author could check the manuscript status, but he was required to



check his email regularly. A journal system typically allows authors to monitor editor feedback, and whether a submitted manuscript has been accepted without revision, or accepted with minor and major revisions required, or rejected (Rassool, 2006).

### **Manuscript revision**

This fourth theme refers to an opportunity given by a journal editor or assistant editor to revise the manuscript in accordance with reviewer comments. Tewari (2022) stated that revision is a policy of journals which typically is clearly stated in the journal's website and submission portal as initial guidance for authors who seek to publish their manuscripts.

Getting the reviewer's review version forwarded by our corresponding author, I read comments highlighted in track changes several times. As the first author, I tried to highlight the changes myself, then asked the corresponding author to resubmit the revised version through the submission system, but after a few days, we were asked to revise it according to a different track changes format commonly used in this reputable international journal.

Lack of experience in revising reviewed manuscripts lead to our manuscript being returned to be rerevised by us using track changes as suggested by chief editors/reviewers. Chien (2019) noted that researchers often could not make appropriate comments as suggested by reviewers, due to their poor understanding of revision systems.

Worries about making similar mistakes made me discuss the revision system used by reviewers with my co-authors and a colleague who have experienced reputable international journal revision. I mean, I learnt to revise the manuscript using track changes. After that, I began to revise the manuscript myself.

Knowledge of revision systems is very important for authors to respond to reviewers' comments. To fulfill the reviewer suggestions through track changes, self-learning was done. This effort was similar to actions by Stoilescu & McDougall (2010) who negotiated with editors for additional time to complete their revision. Also similarly, Doewes et al. (2023) pointed out that their University initiated training programs for lecturers to train students to write qualified articles and respond to reviewer comments. Rahmasari et al. (2024) found that novice researchers overcame revision problems by discussions with research team partners. Differently, Hidayat et al (2024) highlighted that doctoral students used more experienced authors to help them to fit in reviewers' feedback. Often, reviewer feedback may lack illustrative specifics that are helpful for novice authors, for example in the four reasons for article rejection stated by Wagner (2012): the topic is not relevant for journal aims and scope; not presenting research results to support analysis; not supported with clear data, and not showing deeper analysis and discussion.

### **APC payment**

Payment of an article publishing charge (APC) is required by many journals that are published open access but do not have an income from paid subscriptions or sponsorships. I wrote:

After revising manuscript several times, the editor decided that our article is accepted for publication. However, we have to make payment for APC within three days before the article is published.

Payment of an APC is usually an obligation for authors arising after a reviewing process has concluded with acceptance of their manuscript (Tewari, 2022; Oshakbayev et al., 2021). Due to the no funding support from our institution and a limited time to make payment, we had to use our own money:

I and my team decided to pay APC ourselves because no funding was provided by our higher education stakeholders.

No funding support from stakeholders is one of the problems faced by lecturers who teach at small universities like mine. To obtain publishing of our articles in RIJ, we used our own budget. As noted in Indrayadi (2023), no funding provided by institutions leads doctoral students into deciding to use their own budget to cover a publication APC in RIJ. Likewise, Hidayat et al. (2024) revealed that doctoral students searched for low-APC journals and paid the APC themselves to publish their research. Feyera et al. (2017) suggested that university stakeholders should provide better incentives for academic authors to increase publication rates. Hence, to promote the publishing of research articles, governments must support scholars with increased funding (Mouton, 2011; Arsyad et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

This study aims to explore my challenges in publishing research in RIJ for the first time after completing my doctoral degree at Jambi University, Jambi, Indonesia. I show that I faced a long journey hindering me as first author and object of the study, who was responsible for preparing and publishing the manuscript. I need to have knowledge of title formulation, participant recruitment, manuscript preparation, submission, revision, and APC payment. The first challenge was associated with lack of knowledge of trending issues relevant to RIJ. Second, recruiting participants, as I found difficulty in finding participants to get involved in my study. Third, manuscript preparation concerning writing skills. Fourth, submission, when I lacked knowledge of and experience with online journal systems. Fifth, revision, which relates to systems used by reviewers for highlighting comments. Finally, I faced challenges in paying article processing charge imposed by the targeted journals.

This study is focused only upon my own long journey and challenges when first publishing research in a RIJ. Using an autoethnographic approach, in this study I am the only participant. Obviously, more autoethnographic research is needed to record the reflections of academics from many other higher education institutions and contexts. Although my study explores only my challenges and long journey in publishing articles in RIJ, I hope other researchers learn from my experiences, to help them overcome similar problems. For government, especially Ministries concerned with education, research, and technology, I wish to recommend (1) maintaining publication policies that facilitate doctoral and

professorial candidates to publish their research results as one of their candidature requirements; (2) requiring universities to provide training programs in academic writing for lecturers and researchers; and (3) encouraging universities to prioritise their budgeting in the areas of research and publications, to better cover lecturers' needs.

For stakeholders, I seek to recommend (1) providing academic writing training programs for researchers to prepare their research results for publication; (2) promoting the importance of publications for career progression; (3) allocating funding to help lecturers to conduct research and pay APCs. For academic authors, my findings can encourage them into (1) conducting research in their discipline; (2) preparing articles aligned with RIJ standards; (3) equipping themselves with knowledge of RIJ online journal publication practices and procedures.

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**Please cite as:** Indrayadi, T. (2024). The long journey to my first publication in a reputable international journal: An autoethnographic account. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(4), 1332-1349. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier34/indrayadi.pdf>