

An argument for scientific writing in the nation's Colleges of Health Sciences

Thomas Syre, Ayalu Aklilu

Conducting well –designed health-related research and then presenting it clearly and accurately is a challenge. Clear language usage, correct citation presentation and proper style and formatting require not only expert knowledge in the health discipline, but also good writing skills.

In Ethiopia, in particular, thesis proposals and those in health sciences are written in English. Although students in Ethiopia have been studying English since primary school, the writing skills of many university students-both undergraduate and graduate- seem at best fair. Baccalaureate research projects and masters theses are often written with multiple misspellings, unclear statements, long and often times confusing sentences and with serious problems with old citations and incomplete references. These problems, on occasions, are seen in published extracts as well.

A concerted effort at language improvement is needed at the health college level where students can be expected to learn their discipline and also strengthen their writing abilities. A major effort is required throughout Ethiopia's colleges of health sciences to improve the writing performance of students. Scientific writing should be a requirement of all students early in their course of study in the health sciences colleges. A scientific writing course which provides a minimum of a review of the English language including grammar, spelling, sentence and paragraph structure and any necessary university document formatting is needed along with the skills of critical thinking.

Also, scientific writing should be emphasized by the health college staff members as they function in teaching

and student-advisory capacities. Staff members can benefit the students by paying more attention not just to the content, but also to the language usage of theses, term papers and other documents written by students.

Documents submitted by students should be closely examined from the title page to the last reference or appendix. They can check for spelling, clarity in expressing ideas, required university formatting, and correct citations and, importantly, current and complete web-based and hard copy references. This takes additional time for staff members, but it is a significant and important learning experience for the student in his language and professional development.

Aside from a course for all students, to improve the current writing situation at the colleges of health sciences, in-service language education could be provided for staff members who need the assistance in this area. On-going in-service education sessions by skilled English language educators could be conducted. The commitment of university administrators to provide the necessary expert language personnel is needed for the enhanced language skills of staff members.

We call upon staff members, department heads, college deans and mid-level and senior university administrators to pay more serious attention to English language usage in our colleges of health sciences at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Students need to be encouraged and more needs to be done. Those who are able should allocate the necessary resources to scientific writing as it affects the quality of education and scientific output by the country.

¹IFESH Volunteer and Associate Professor, Harar Campus, College of Health Sciences, Haramaya University, Tel. - 020032663, 0256661878, Haramaya, Ethiopia;

²Lecturer, Department of Public Health, Haramaya University, Haramaya, Ethiopia