

August 2018 – Volume 22, Number 2

## **Exploring the SSCI Phenomenon within the Publish or Perish Principle for Non-native English-speaking ELT Professionals**

**Fan-Wei Kung**

National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

<fwkung@ntnu.edu.tw>

### **Abstract**

With the dissemination of knowledge in higher education, the publish or perish principle has become the norm for academics around the world to remain competitive. The Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) phenomenon has thus emerged in academia and been utilized as a benchmark for research excellence and tenure considerations. While research has revealed that the publish or perish principle could have a multitude of issues in higher education, little attempts have been made to explore academics' outlook on the SSCI phenomenon in a broader geographical area, particularly in the field of English language teaching (ELT). To bridge this gap, twelve ELT academics were recruited from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan with an aim to explore their perceptions, attitudes, and their perceived pros and cons of the SSCI phenomenon in their own institutions. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed through an interview protocol based on a matrix analysis via phenomenology. The findings demonstrate four conceptualizations that are formed and predicated on the SSCI phenomenon. Data also evince that although these academics were recruited from different countries, the SSCI phenomenon seems to be identical with regard to how academics are evaluated for promotion and tenure at the expense of several salient practices in ELT.

**Keywords:** SSCI, academia, higher education, ELT

### **Introduction**

#### **Publish or perish in academia**

In higher education, academics are under extreme pressure to publish in academic peer-reviewed journals for research excellence (Coleman, 2014; McGrail et al., 2006). For the past few decades, the publish or perish principle has become prevalent in higher education. De Rond et al. (2005) define this principle as a race against time on which a faculty member's tenure is based for publishing. It consists of a time frame when a faculty member is initially appointed and further evaluated from his/her publications before any tenure decision is made. Based on this principle, employment, promotion, and tenure in academia are solely predicated

on the number of articles published in high-status international journals aimed at pursuing academic impact, selectivity as well as superiority in the field (Bohannon, 2013). However, Denning (1997) and Eisenhart (2002) argue that this practice undermines academic innovations and generations of incremental scholarly production that could not be quantified by the number of articles published.

### **Pros and cons of the publish or perish principle**

With the prevalence of the publish or perish principle, it is not uncommon to witness its rationales from several research findings to justify such a practice. Teute (2001) indicates that academic publications make the newest research findings available, which could further facilitate theoretical understandings and teaching practices. The publish or perish principle thus encourages academics to attain research prominence. Lyytinen et al. (2007) reiterate the salience of academic publications based on the value of research for further practice and implementation that could yield a greater contribution to the field. The wide readership of each journal could also disseminate knowledge that would not be available without the publication of the latest research. Sun (2012) suggests that publishing grants faculty members and educational institutions mobility on an international stage that brings influences and powers as a result. Recognition, prestige, and membership to the selective and excluded societies of scholars in various disciplines are what conceptualize the publish or publish principle in academia (Bohannon, 2013). In education, publishing affords researchers and practitioners the ways in which teaching and learning are conceived and implemented, both directly and indirectly, which can boost national as well as global university rankings based on the same community of academics (Coleman, 2014).

Although aimed at research excellence, the principle of publish or perish in higher education has also resulted in a multitude of issues faced by faculty members around the world. De Rond et al. (2005) maintain that many academics might shy away from the research that is less likely to be considered for publication in some selective journals. Due to time constraints, more interdisciplinary, ethnographic, and longitudinal investigations that foreground a distinct philosophical paradigm could be ignored to shorten the publication process for skewed results. Mathews (2007) claims that researchers in academia have become more anxious within the publish or perish principle as the stakes become higher for promotion and tenure. It not only leads to excessive burdens as far as faculty members are concerned, but also the emphasis on research productivity for publication at the expense of teaching at many educational institutions around the world. Salager-Meyer (2008) observes that more pressure has been exerted by many universities in the past few decades to publish with the consequences of failing to do so could lead to refusal of tenure for faculty members. This makes it seem legitimate for these institutions to force teachers to publish that guarantees their career advancement based on their efforts to package and sell their articles to get them published in the future. As Miller et al. (2011) observe, the emphasis of research productivity that is predicated on the number of articles published reveals such problems as insecurity, restlessness, and disturbance for faculty members. The gap between research and practice could thus be widened due to the unequal emphasis on research that makes teaching less important for academics.

## **The SSCI phenomenon in higher education**

Within the publish or perish model, researchers generally understand that publishing in peer-reviewed and indexed journals makes their work more reachable and valuable (Eisenhart, 2002). Preferably, those journals indexed in the Science Citation Index (SCI), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) are what indicate whether they are the leading and most influential publications in the field (Bohannon, 2013). Although other databases also exist, the SSCI benchmark is regarded as the most salient parameter in academia in that it is internationally utilized for evaluation of research funding, promotion, and tenure (Chou et al., 2013). Seeing this trend, many countries have started adopting the SSCI benchmark as the standard in higher education pertaining to evaluation of publications for career advancement. While the pursuit of research excellence is clear, this phenomenon has further resulted in several issues in academia as research unveils.

The SSCI phenomenon could be experienced the most in the geographical area of Asia (see Miller et al., 2011 and Sun, 2012 for a comprehensive analysis). Shin and Harman (2009) point out that the reliance on the SSCI benchmark for publication could pose serious problems for authors whose first language is not English since almost all publications indexed in this database are written in English. In order to fulfill the language requirement, cultural barriers could arise during the translation process from one culture to another. Lai (2004) contends that the SSCI phenomenon could be seen in many universities these days when they prefer recruiting faculty members who have several indexed articles that could represent their academic excellence at the expense of teaching performance. Lai (2011) asserts that many universities in Hong Kong have initiated several new regulations mandating faculty members to have a number of SSCI publications for promotion even though English is their second language. This signifies their lower chances of getting promoted and obtaining tenure based on the SSCI benchmark when they need to conform to the norm of publishing in English. The prevalence of the SSCI phenomenon is also reported by Liu and Liu (2005) in which more English language publications are valued more as opposed to the ones that are written in the authors' first language in Chinese higher education. Many local journals and translated books are thus devalued that further leads to several such problems as the loss of one's language and cultural identities.

### **The study: The SSCI phenomenon in ELT**

Sun (2012) conducted a study exploring academics' perceptions of and attitudes toward the SSCI phenomenon in English language teaching (ELT), and the results reveal that while they generally understand the reason of doing so in the pursuit of international visibility and recognition of their research work, these researchers have the tendency to ignore the local journals and deliberately distance themselves from their local colleagues when referencing and drafting their articles for publication. This delineates how the SSCI phenomenon has influenced these academics from their own practices conducting research and writing up for publication in ELT. Chou et al. (2013) argue that the standardization of the SSCI phenomenon could promote an unequal allocation of governmental resources between the fields of sciences and humanities owing to the disparities of research aims and functions. That is, as Duszak and Lewkowicz (2008) have clearly indicated, more journals in the field of

sciences are more likely to be indexed compared with humanities such as ELT, where many non-native English-speaking scholars can be found. As a result, this phenomenon causes the uneven distribution when quantifying the number of articles when tenure decisions are made (Coleman, 2014). This will have an adverse impact on ELT professionals who aim to have their work published in such indexed journals for their professional development (see Hewings et al., 2010 for a review).

From the literature reviewed, it is important to note that while the prevalence of the SSCI phenomenon could be observed within the publish or perish principle in academia, a perusal of the empirical studies here unveils that there is still a dearth of research with regard to how academics view such a phenomenon in Asia, particularly in ELT. As one of the first attempts to bridge this gap, this investigation explores how non-native English-speaking ELT academics perceive such a model from their own institutions for academic excellence based on the publish or perish principle in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. As all of them are professors whose first language is not English but who need to publish in English in order to conform to the SSCI phenomenon for obtaining promotion and tenure, it is essential to explore these academics' perceptions and experiences in detail for more discussion and consideration in the field. With this in mind, the following research questions were formed to guide this study:

1. What are the perceptions and attitudes toward the SSCI phenomenon from non-native English-speaking ELT academics' experiences?
2. What are the pros and cons of the SSCI phenomenon from non-native English-speaking ELT academics' experiences?

## **Methodology**

### **Context and participants**

Participants were recruited based on a volunteer sample (Seidman, 2012) from twelve ELT academics from China (N= 3), Japan (N=2), South Korea (N= 4), and Taiwan (N= 3) for this qualitative study. All of them were teaching at their respective institutions in their own countries when the data were collected. As all had obtained their tenure after teaching for more than fifteen years (eleven years on average for their professorship based on the SSCI benchmark), it is assumed that they all had their own experiences pertaining to how the SSCI phenomenon works in higher education in their countries (Sun, 2012). They taught classes of 20-50 students aged from 18 to 25 with various levels, and supervised M.A. and Ph.D. research at their universities. All the academics here were reported to be both a practitioner and researcher with a ratio of 40%/60% in regard to teaching and research at their institutions. An agreement form was sent to them through e-mail before this study commenced with the understanding that their names would be replaced with numbers from 1 to 12 for data collection and analysis to ensure anonymity (Fitze & McGarrell, 2008).

## Procedures

Prior to this study, a participatory form was sent through e-mail looking for the potential participants whose backgrounds fit the aim and scope of this project at an international conference held in the USA in the years of 2012, 2013, and 2014 respectively. After obtaining their consent forms online, all the participants were provided with an open-ended questionnaire (see [Appendix A](#)) based on the research questions with regard to their perceptions, attitudes, and the pros and cons toward the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle in their own contexts through e-mail. It is thus known that such a principle dominates their academic culture in their institutions for promotion and tenure. Afterward, each participant was asked to take part in a semi-structured interview (see [Appendix B](#)) with me after the conference for the purpose of elaborating on their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes along with the advantages and disadvantages of the SSCI phenomenon underpinning their research practices in detail. The interview lasted for around seven hours for all the participants in total and was audio-taped and further coded as well as transcribed for analysis. Since all of them are experienced ELT academics, the interview was conducted individually in English.

## Instruments

An open-ended questionnaire, researcher journal, and semi-structured interview were utilized for assessing the participants' perceptions and attitudes toward the SSCI phenomenon in their own countries. As for the reason why an open-ended questionnaire was used in this study, Nunan (1992) posits that open-ended questions are more likely to reflect accurately what the participants want to express. They also allow the participants to explain their beliefs and attitudes in more detail (Dörnyei, 2007). Questionnaire items were designed from the literature reviewed. Some items asked their perceptions regarding the publish or publish principle and the SSCI phenomenon for both promotion and tenure from their experiences. Ten open-ended questions were further constructed for the questionnaire and it was subsequently forwarded to two other academics in the field to ensure its reliability and validity before administration. As Wagner (2010) cogently illustrates the salience of piloting questionnaires, a pilot study was conducted based on three academics in language teaching who were provided with the questionnaire for critique to ensure its wording and comprehensibility. These academics were not included as any of the sample participants in this inquiry. These items were revised later for clarity and preciseness with the recommendations of these academics.

The design of a semi-structured interview was an attempt to complement the questionnaire for more meaningful and much thicker data to be collected. Based on this method, it was anticipated that more related themes could thus be generated as they arose during the process (Ary et al., 2006). Open-ended questions were constructed to give the participants more opportunities to form their answers that the researcher might not have expected previously. During the data analysis, an interview protocol was utilized where the data were categorized and further coded through a matrix analysis through phenomenology, which explored a particular phenomenon as it transpired through human consciousness with the subjects'

identified perceptions and experiences (McDonough & McDonough, 2004). At the methodological level, phenomenology entailed me conducting exhaustive inquiries into the experiences of those involved in the phenomenon (Holliday, 2002). During the data collection period, field notes were taken along with a researcher journal for documenting every salient interaction for further analysis.

Five items were constructed in the semi-structured interview to explore the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and the perceived pros and cons of the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle in their home institutions based on an examination of the literature. The items were forwarded to two other academics in language teaching to critique the overarching goal for the expert validity, followed by some minor revisions before the items were finalized for administration. These items were further revised for clarity and precision with the suggestions of these academics. Based on the qualitative research methods, an analytic induction (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) was utilized to analyze the transcribed interview data. That is, I returned repeatedly to the transcript and questionnaire to read and examine the data to search for relevant and recurring themes. In order to avoid interfering with the data collection and analysis process, Merriam's (2002) bracketing process was used where I was aware of my presuppositions, prejudices, and assumptions before data analysis since all of the participants are from different countries of various cultures that could result in different interpretations. Under these circumstances, no pre-conceived notions and stereotypes were formed by me for more objective and trustworthy data interpretations. Constant reflection on the research methods was also exercised by me throughout this study with multiple data examinations and analyses after collection to ensure objectivity and trustworthiness (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). Member check was used by sending the transcripts to them for their accuracy verification for authenticity and credibility via e-mail (McDonough & McDonough, 2004).

## **Results of the study**

To answer the proposed research questions, four conceptualizations subsequently emerged during the data analysis period including research prominence, community of academics, research-practice gap, and skewedness of research publications.

### **Research prominence**

Based on the findings, ten participants indicated that the SSCI phenomenon based on the publish or perish principle helps them to achieve research prominence both inside and outside their own institutions. Participant 4 illustrated during the interview that "My university really asks us faculty members to strive for the SSCI journals for publication because they are more widely cited internationally." Participants 1, 3, and 7 added the same view in the open-ended questionnaire that their universities have the impression that the number of SSCI articles determines the school's rankings around the world. That is, the more SSCI publications, the higher the international status from a scholarly and academic perspective in the field. Participant 12 agreed by adding another related issue from her experience during the interview that "Somehow, it is assumed by many colleagues in the field that those SSCI journals are those with higher impact factors that can give more value to the researchers who

can have their articles published there.” Participants 2 and 5 shared the same opinion by illustrating in the questionnaire that “The focus of SSCI publications leads to an increased interest in impact factors and other impact measures from the university for promotion and tenure that pushes us to have more SSCI articles to pursue research excellence not only locally but internationally...and this is good for us as academics in the long run.” As all the participants indicated during the interview, it is expected of them to get promoted to obtain tenure within six years on average after the initial appointment, and the number of SSCI publications in general accounts for close to 70% of the evaluation in total, followed by teaching and service within their own institutions. Having been through this SSCI phenomenon personally after earning his tenure, participant 8 pointed out his perceptions during the interview that “The people on the evaluation committee usually equate SSCI publications with high impact factors...and it seems like more SSCI articles would bring my institution more fame and prestige on a global scale compared with the local journals.” Participants 9 and 10 also added another salient issue in the questionnaire that the SSCI articles would undergo a more rigorous review process, which makes it harder for them to be published, and this could make it easier for the committee members to evaluate one’s research record based on the number of SSCI work for promotion and tenure. From the interview, 75% of the participants (9 out of 12) agreed that a more stringent review standard would assist them in attaining research prominence during the process of writing up their research for SSCI publications, and this would not have been possible if this system was not in place that could stimulate their research potential.

### **Community of academics**

Based on the data collected, almost all (11 out of 12) demonstrated that the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle could form a community of academics that gravitates toward each other conducting the same or similar research in the field on a global scale. Participants 2 and 5 illustrated in the questionnaire that the reference of SSCI as a benchmark encourages a community of scholars to assimilate and work collectively based on the aim and scope of each journal for knowledge dissemination. Participant 8 added during the interview that “It is normal for those scholars serving as the editorial board members to meet occasionally at the conference to talk about how the journal is run and how the articles are reviewed based on certain standards... but if you do not make that far, it is less likely that you would be one of them.” As one of the editorial board members at an international peer-reviewed SSCI journal in language education, participant 12, reported during the interview that “We, all members on the editorial board, usually get together at least once a year to discuss the publication options, guidelines, experiences, changes, and some future trends for the journal at the conference to keep each other updated.” This phenomenon was also indicated by participants 1, 3, and 7 in the questionnaire that the editors in some SSCI publications would automatically bond together either from the articles that they have published or book chapters that they have edited. As these participants expressed, this community serves as a means to assist each other in reaching certain goals in the field across institutions, and it was mentioned in the questionnaire that it would be easier for those famous scholars who everyone recognizes to have their work published from their experiences in the field. Participant 11 further added during the interview that “It’s not surprising to see that there are quite a few famous scholars in the field who serve as the chief editors in some SSCI

journals...sometimes the same person could be serving as the honorary chief editor at the same time in other journals...I think it just shows that they bond fairly well based on their influence in the field.” To reach the goal by socializing with these famous scholars, participants 4 and 6 pointed out in the questionnaire that it is necessary for them to write more high-quality articles in order to let them appear in more SSCI journals. Based on the stiff competition trying to publish in these publications and be part of the community, 92% of the participants (11 out of 12) indicated during the interview that they had strived to write more SSCI articles for publication at the inception of their employment and it has been rather challenging for them as non-native English-speaking scholars. However, with their persistence and academic endeavor based on the ideal membership and socialization in the community that is predicated on the SSCI phenomenon, all of them had obtained tenure and become experienced researchers in their own respective institutions. According to all the participants, the SSCI phenomenon could be regarded as an opportunity that is extremely challenging yet rewarding, which constitutes an advantage for them to attain a more influential status in ELT.

### **Research-practice gap**

However, eleven participants revealed that a research-practice gap exists that is predicated on the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle in their countries. Participants 1 and 5 indicated in the questionnaire that the gap between research and practice widens when the focus of promotion and tenure is solely on the number of SSCI publications. As reported earlier by the participants, on average 70% of the evaluation is based on publications with a clear preference toward the SSCI benchmark at all institutions from the recruited participants, it is not uncommon to witness that many researchers have started trying to have their work published as often as they can in such journals to show their research productivity as participants 2 and 9 pointed out in the questionnaire. Similar to this observation, participant 7 pointed out during the interview that “From my experience, many of my colleagues care little about the actual implementation of the research process that forms an overarching picture of the entire project...this is especially worse in the field of ELT because it seems like they care more about trying to have their work published in those SSCI journals.” Participant 12 shared the same outlook during the interview that “It is my belief that research should be used to inform practice in TESOL, but I suppose there is a gap and it still continues to widen between scholars and practitioners because little practical and useful pedagogical knowledge could be passed down and transmitted from those articles aiming for the SSCI journals only...”

Another problematic issue has also emerged as participants 3, 6, and 8 pointed out in the questionnaire that the SSCI publications have taken precedence over value creation and teaching in their countries. That is, many faculty members would publish for the sake of publishing for promotion and tenure without much reflection on the genuine influence of each article that could contribute to their practices based on the SSCI phenomenon. Participant 11 agreed with this view by illustrating during the interview that “Now that 70% of the promotion and tenure is from your SSCI publications, is it not surprising to see that many faculty members, especially new assistant professors, who care more about research rather than teaching to boost their research record to stay in the field... we have all been there and I think it is something that needs to be discussed again to see if this is what research really

means in higher education.” Participant 9 further indicated that “Somehow we as academics lose the true meaning and impact of our publications in terms of how they can make a difference in the field...and seeing that many professors pursue their SSCI publications at the expense of teaching, it is really necessary for our educational system to be reshuffled.” From the data collected from the interview, all of the participants admitted openly that they had indeed placed more emphasis on research during the first few years after their initial employment to obtain tenure, and according to them, there is a pressing need to change this system.

### **Skewedness of research publications**

Another perspective conceptualized by all the participants was the skewedness of research publications based on the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle in their countries. Participants 4 and 7 indicated in the questionnaire that since more journals indexed in SSCI are more science-oriented compared to humanities such as ELT, some researchers would try to have their work published in some journals that are totally unrelated to their research interests just to have more SSCI publications. In other words, the focus seems to be on those publications indexed in SSCI only at the expense of others that are more related and appropriate for the aim and scope of their potential manuscripts. Participant 5 illustrated her experience by adding that “One of my colleagues in school doing computer sciences found several SSCI journals in educational technology and tried to have his work published even though he did not have any previous interests in educational technology... somehow those journals become his goal because they are SSCI journals.” Participant 9 shared the same opinion during the interview that “It is common for us to gather a list of SSCI journals that are related or somehow related to our field for publication.” All the participants reported that their tenure and promotion are heavily contingent on the SSCI publications at their institutions. Given such a clear preference based on the stiff competition trying to have articles published in more SSCI journals, the participants from China and Korea pointed out during the interview that some institutions in their countries offer a bonus check or salary increase at the end of the year to those faculty members who have more SSCI publications every year. This encourages them to publish in more SSCI journals for a higher status as well as recognition as opposed to what the research could genuinely make a contribution to the field. As an experienced researcher of ELT in Japan, participant 8 narrated during the interview that “We are really getting too carried away by worshiping the SSCI phenomenon in higher education...looking back from my experience for the past few years, many people ended up pursuing their own goals instead of what these publications can really inspire and benefit our students...this is really depressing especially for us who are teacher educators who should have known this better.” In addition, all three participants from Taiwan added their observations during the interview that the SSCI phenomenon would be more stringent for novice and new graduates aspiring to land a tenure-track position since most national universities there expect new faculty members to have SSCI publications. Under these circumstances, new graduates could not land a full-time teaching job since they are considered not prepared without conforming to the SSCI norm.

Another issue emerging from the SSCI phenomenon was pointed out by the same academics from Taiwan, in which a couple of scholars’ articles were withdrawn from two indexed

journals in engineering in 2014 when it was found that their studies were questionable with fabricated results and identities. The peer-review ring was revealed to be perpetrated by two scholars in Taiwan who used fabricated identities for article submission to manipulate the review process. After a few months, two other academics' work was also retracted by another indexed journal for violating academic integrity by fabricating their research findings in order to have their research published. One of the participants from Taiwan pointed out that "It's really not something that we as academics should be proud of when seeing what has happened here...the SSCI phenomenon has become almost like a syndrome where the number of SSCI publications dominates and leads to our promotion and tenure...many professors would do whatever they can trying to have their work published by those journals even though they know it's not honest by fabricating their results." This vividly demonstrates that the SSCI phenomenon has adversely influenced how academics view theory and practice in various ways.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

From the data collected, the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle has facilitated and assisted these ELT academics in writing up their research for SSCI journals given that all of them are non-native English speakers. In order to obtain tenure from their local institutions, they had tried their best to conform to the norm in which the number of SSCI articles dominates even though these participants were recruited from four different contexts. As this could push their local institutions to the global stage based on the number of articles published, the SSCI phenomenon was reported here as one of the forces motivating them to publish for academic excellence. The result yielded here confirmed those of Chou (2014), Chou et al. (2013), and Sun (2012) that many countries in the geographical area of Asia have experienced the SSCI phenomenon in higher education that subsequently results in the interests in having articles published in those SSCI journals with high impact factors to achieve research prominence. This also holds true as one of the advantages based on the ELT academics from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Also, the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle has formed an ideal community of scholars who are similar when it comes to their research interests and influences in the field. Being part of such a community seems essential to them in that it carries value that foregrounds their academic careers from different countries. This phenomenon lent support to the findings of Flowerdew and Li (2009), Lai (2004), and Liu and Liu (2005) that the SSCI phenomenon exerts a substantial influence on higher education around the world, and this trend has thus formed a group of people who excel at their academic discourses within a specific community for publication. Since this community could be exclusive for those novice researchers, it is not surprising that many scholars around the world have tried to have their work published by some indexed journals (Coleman, 2014). The SSCI phenomenon, as the participants noted, plays an important role in their academic careers as non-native English speakers who need to be well-versed in such discourses to move forward (Hewings et al., 2010). According to this study, this phenomenon could also be observed in ELT for the academics from such Asian contexts as China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

In addition to the community of academics, the research-practice gap also exists based on the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle from these ELT academics of various nationalities. In order to conform to the norm, many faculty members have tried to have their research published in some SSCI journals for career advancement while ignoring the overall research implementation for much deeper reflection during the process. A widening gap between theory and practice has also been identified that undermines the overall school climate for more practical and pedagogical knowledge to be gained for practitioners. The result was corroborated by Chou (2014), Chou et al. (2013), and Mathews (2007) who clearly point out the gap between research and practice based on the SSCI phenomenon. The mismatch between researchers and practitioners evidently needs to be remedied with a reconceptualization of the SSCI phenomenon in the field.

Finally, the SSCI phenomenon has further led to the skewedness of research publications for these ELT academics. Having been through the entire process of obtaining tenure in their own countries, these scholars reported that it is a common practice for their colleagues to publish in more SSCI publications at the expense of their genuine research interests for more recognition within their own institutions. Emphasis is also placed on the SSCI journals only for reference and publication given that a bonus check or salary increase is offered as a form of encouragement for research excellence in China and Korea. New graduates in Taiwan are less likely to land a tenure-track position without conforming to the SSCI norm which shows the national preference trying to create the SSCI elitism that belongs to those who are well-versed in the SSCI discourses in academia. Nonetheless, scholars' work was withdrawn from indexed journals after it was found to contain bogus and fabricated identities and findings. The result here corroborated those found by Chou (2014), Lai (2011), and Shin and Harman (2009) that the reliance on the SSCI benchmark could result in a mismatch between the purpose and function of conducting research for scholars who try to conform to the norm.

This inquiry investigated Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese ELT academics' perceptions, attitudes, and their perceived pros and cons of the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle in their institutions. Several kernels of information have since been yielded including research prominence, community of academics, research-practice gap, and skewedness of research publications that could be potentially salient yet problematic. As for the advantages that underpin their academic careers, the SSCI phenomenon not only motivates these academics to publish for research prominence, but also stimulates their research potential trying to have their work published in high-status international journals for more visibility on a global scale. The formation of a community of scholars with similar research interests hence helps them to assimilate and gather research resources more collectively based on the aim and scope of each indexed journal for knowledge dissemination. In order to be part of the community for more socialization with other experts in the field, researchers would try their best to elevate the quality of their research work in the hopes of meeting the aim and scope of the indexed journals for more international recognition in the field for more effective knowledge transmission. However, the research-practice gap has been identified that could undermine the actual implementation of the research process when many scholars care more about trying to have their work published in more SSCI journals at the expense of practicality that could inform teaching. This clearly reveals a widening gap between theory and practice as far as the participants are concerned. Ultimately, the SSCI

phenomenon has led to a common practice for academics to publish in more SSCI publications at the expense of their genuine research interests for more recognition within their own institutions. Incentives such as a bonus check and salary increase are offered for research excellence. Novice researchers are thus less likely to be considered for tenure-track positions, forcing them to conform to the SSCI phenomenon in academia. Fabricated and bogus research articles were also retracted by high-status journals, giving not only those individual perpetrators, but also their nation a bad reputation in academia that could have a lasting effect for decades. Though this study only focuses on non-native English-speaking ELT academics, the results are identical to what research has indicated so far in other disciplines in higher education regarding the publish or perish principle (Miller et al., 2011).

The following implications and recommendations are henceforth suggested. First, the system in higher education (not only within the geographical area of Asia, but also other similar contexts) needs to be reconsidered given that the SSCI phenomenon could have a multitude of effects that are found to undermine both researchers and practitioners. While more research excellence should be encouraged, more appropriate criteria should also be in place when it comes to promotion and tenure for faculty members to have a more balanced and holistic evaluation. With that said, cautions should be exercised when the decision is based solely on the number of SSCI articles published while devaluing some local journals that might carry important value in the field. Other such criteria as teaching and service should also be recognized since faculty members tend to overlook them given that the publish or perish principle prevails in academia (De Rond et al., 2005). Second, the SSCI phenomenon needs to be reconceptualized in higher education in that many faculty members tend to focus on publishing at the expense of teaching as the participants indicated. Universities should recognize this by placing more emphasis on teaching for promotion and tenure to avoid pursuing the SSCI phenomenon blindly that lowers the quality of teaching at the same time. Third, caution should be exercised when providing incentives for more SSCI publications only if this phenomenon is in dire need of a reconceptualization as this study has demonstrated. Fourth, the Ministry of Education in each country is advised to set up a more thorough mechanism for tenure and promotion for scholars in humanities such as ELT. That is, more indexes should be included so the SSCI phenomenon could be changed for more research outlets for ELT professionals. Fifth, as one reviewer indicated, the notion of tenure is non-existent for many ELT academics in other contexts based on various degrees of contractual assurance in the field including the length of contract, seniority right and perhaps stand in place in different institutions. This study thus confirms the dominance of the SSCI phenomenon for the Asia-Pacific ELT academics who wish to get their tenure and promotion in the field. Compared with those who are non-tenured either because of the SSCI phenomenon or institutional policy, the participants here might seem to be more content after they became legitimate members of this community. As the data revealed, the emphasis of the SSCI phenomenon might widen the gap between theory and practice by favoring the SSCI publications at the expense of teaching. As Borg (2010) and Ortega (2005) have elucidated, the gap between ELT researchers and language teachers indeed exists because they seem to hold different stances toward knowledge and membership which renders their different discourse communities. For academics, choosing where to publish their work might be more important than preparing students for their enhanced writing ability in another language. This also reminds us of the fact that for journals to be selected for the SSCI benchmark, English is

the norm for publication (Sun, 2012), making it less likely for the local journals (published in the participants' native language) to be indexed and recognized based on the current SSCI phenomenon observed here.

Several limitations should also be noted. *Prima facie*, the participants were recruited from four different contexts. Caution should be exercised when interpreting the data. Next, the small number of participants sampled in this inquiry denotes that little generalizations could be made. Nonetheless, Lantolf (2000) argues that research utilizing qualitative methods to explore humans' experiences is valuable not because of its generalizable results based on the central theoretical as well as pedagogical principles in education. Lastly, the precise details of the SSCI specifications could not be provided such as the criteria regarding which journal is indexed and how it is valued in that it is beyond the scope of this work. What is clear from the data is how the number of SSCI articles published in such journals (presumably with higher impact factors) can play an important role for these non-native English-speaking scholars that can have some important implications in the field. Despite these limitations, this study has made an important contribution by bringing together ELT academics' perceptions and higher education research based on the SSCI phenomenon within the publish or perish principle in academia.

Future research is warranted to find a clear connection between the SSCI phenomenon and scholars in other fields to shed more light on the relationship between research and practice based on the publish or perish principle. It is through recognizing the complex link between research and practice that we can gradually begin to refine the system in higher education that could better suit the need and aspiration of more people in the field of ELT.

## About the Author

**Fan-Wei Kung** is an assistant professor of TESOL at National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan. He researches, publishes and presents internationally about bilingualism, multilingualism, world Englishes, language & cultural identities, applied linguistics and second language acquisition.

## References

- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Razavieh, A., & Sorenson, C. K. (2006). *Introduction to research in education* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Higher Education.
- Bohannon, J. (2013). Who's afraid of peer review? *Science*, 342(6154), 60–65.
- Borg, S. (2010). Language teacher research engagement. *Language Teaching*, 43, 391-429.
- Chou, C. P. (2014). *The SSCI syndrome in higher education: A local or global phenomenon?* Sense Publishers, Springer.
- Chou, C. P., Lin, H. F., & Chiu, Y. J. (2013). The impact of SSCI and SCI on Taiwan's academy: An outcry for fair play. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 14, 23-31.

Coleman, J. (2014). How to get published in English: Advice from the outgoing editor-in-chief. *System*, 42, 404-411.

Denning, P. J. (1997). A new social contract for research. *Communications of the ACM*, 40, 132-134.

De Rond, M., & Miller, A. N. (2005). Publish or perish bane or boon of academic life? *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 14, 321-329.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Duszak, A., & Lewkowicz, J. (2008). Publishing academic texts in English: A Polish perspective. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7, 108-120.

Eisenhart, M. (2002). The paradox of peer review: Admitting too much or allowing too little? *Research in Science Education*, 32, 241-255.

Fitze, M., & McGarrell, H. M. (2008). Teaching language in ESL face-to-face and written electronic discussions. *TESL-EJ*, 12(2). Available online: <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume12/ej46/ej46a2/>

Flowerdew, J., & Li, Y. (2009). English or Chinese? The trade-off between local and international publication among Chinese academics in the humanities and social sciences. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 18, 1-16.

Hewings, A., Lillis, T., & Vladimirou, D. (2010). Who's citing whose writings? A corpus based study of citations as interpersonal resource in English medium national and English medium international journals. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9, 102-115.

Holliday, A. (2002). *Doing and writing qualitative research*. Sage, London.

Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Lai, D. M. (2004). *Quantitative indexes are not the panacea of academic evaluation*. Paper presented at the reflecting on Taiwan's higher education academic evaluation conference, International Plenary Hall, National Library, Taipei, Taiwan.

Lai, K. K. (2011). Writing SCI/SSCI papers: Personal perspectives. *Transnational Corporations Review*, 3(4), 87-91.

Lantolf, J. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Liu, S. X., & Liu, N. C. (2005). Classification of Chinese higher education institutions. *Journal of Higher Education*, 26(7), 40-44.
- Lyytinen, K., Baskerville, R., Iivari, J., & Te'eni, D. (2007). Why the old world cannot publish? Overcoming challenges in publishing high-impact IS research. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 16, 317-326.
- Mathews, M. R. (2007). Publish or perish: Is this really a viable set of options? *Accounting Education*, 16, 225-240.
- McDonough, J., & McDonough, S. (2004). *Research methods for English language teachers*. Arnold, London.
- McGrail, M. R., Rickard, C. M., & Jones, R. (2006). Publish or perish: A systematic review of interventions to increase academic publication rates. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25, 19-35.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, A. N., Taylor, S. G., & Bedeian, A. G. (2011). Publish or perish: Academic life as management faculty live it. *Career Development International*, 16, 422-445.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D., & Bailey, K. (2009). *Exploring second language classroom research: A comprehensive guide*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Ortega, L. (2005). For what and for whom is our research? The ethical as transformative lens in instructed SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 427-443.
- Salager-Meyer, F. (2008). Scientific publishing in developing countries: Challenges for the future. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7, 121-132.
- Seidman, I. (2012). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Teachers College Press.
- Shin, J. C., & Harman, G. (2009). New challenges for higher education: Global and Asia-Pacific perspectives. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10, 1-13.
- Sun, Y. C. (2012). TESOL academics' perceptions of SSCI phenomenon and invisible college in Taiwan. *English Teaching & Learning*, 36(4), 79-122.
- Teute, F. J. (2001). To publish and perish: Who are the dinosaurs in scholarly publishing? *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 32, 102-112.

Wagner, E. (2010). Survey research. In B. Paltridge & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Continuum companion to research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 22-38). London/ New York: Continuum.

## **Appendix A**

### Questionnaire

1. What were your experiences of getting promoted and tenure based on the SSCI phenomenon?
2. How do you consider the SSCI phenomenon?
3. How has the SSCI phenomenon influenced you in academia?
4. Why do you think the SSCI phenomenon can (can't) work in academia?
5. What are the advantages of the SSCI phenomenon? Why?
6. What are the disadvantages of the SSCI phenomenon? Why?
7. What are your concerns about the SSCI phenomenon in your country?
8. What are your concerns about the SSCI phenomenon globally?
9. What was your experience trying to conform to the SSCI phenomenon?
10. What changes need to be made based on the SSCI phenomenon in higher education?

## **Appendix B**

### Interview items

1. What are your perceptions of the SSCI phenomenon?
2. What were your experiences of getting promoted and tenure based on the SSCI phenomenon?
3. What might be the issues of the SSCI phenomenon in academia in your country?
4. What are the potential strengths and weaknesses of the SSCI phenomenon both locally and internationally as far as you are concerned?
5. What was your experience of trying to conform to the SSCI phenomenon in your institution?

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite *TESL-EJ* appropriately.