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Peer Reviewing in Applied Linguistics: Reviewers' Perceptions

Vali Mohammadi[1], Mohammad Amini Farsani[2,*], Rana Nazmi[3]

[1] University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran
[2] Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran
[3] Imam Khomeini International University, Ghazvin, Iran

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Abstract

Peer review is carried out in academic journal boards in somewhat different ways to serve the purposes of a particular journal. Through the peer review process, reviewers in academic journals scrutinize and deeply analyze the quality of academic works before the publication. As an 'occluded' genre (Swales, 1996), getting access to the content of peer reviews in journals is too difficult. To shed light on the process of peer review, we investigated the reviewers' perceptions and understandings of peer review in Applied Linguistics journals published in Iran. To this end, we developed an open-ended questionnaire and sent out it to the editorial board reviewers of Iranian certified journals active in publishing on different aspects of applied linguistics. Sixteen reviewers participated in the study by filling in the questionnaire and returning it back. The collected data were analyzed through thematic qualitative data. The results of the study indicate that the reviewers are all active agents in reviewing the manuscript and consider both conceptual, methodological, and mechanics of writing. The implications and recommendations are discussed in light of the findings.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has always been an interminable competition among the scientific institutions all over the world in terms of their academic research productions (Paltridge, 2017), and the publication of journal articles has been the harbinger of these scientific productions. Journal articles have to possess high-quality standards to be considered as a reliable academic output (Nygaard, 2015), and here the role of peer review process emerges. According to Sposato et al. (2014), a better understanding of the peer-review process could enhance the probability of publishing high-quality research. Furthermore, the 2010 Center for Studies in Higher Education Report highlights the fundamental role of the peer review in the academy (Harley, Acord, Earl-Novell, Lawrence, & Judso, 2010). Moreover, Bunner and Larsen (2012) acclaim that the peer review process has been a backbone of the scientific production for decades, rendering multiple functions such as enhancing the quality, facility, and appropriateness of the manuscripts, filtering out flawed research, and realizing a fair and unbiased assessment of a manuscript. Besides, most of the

* **Corresponding Author:** Mohammad Amini Farsani, Department of Foreign Languages, Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran. **Email:** mohammad_farsani@yahoo.com

bibliographic databases (e.g., Scopus, ISI, JCR, SJR) consider running peer review as a basic criterion for selecting the scientific journals (Tan, Cai, Zhou, & Zhang, 2019).

Based on Committee on Publication Ethics (2012), peer review in all its forms serves a crucial function in assuring the integrity of a scholarly research; besides, the reputation of academic journals is mostly influenced by the peer review process (Paltridge, 2017). Chowdhry (2015) believes that the thought underlying the peer review process is that the flaws of a work could be better detected by a group of people other than the authors themselves and the assessments of the work would be more neutral and unbiased. Further, he assumes:

Peer review utilizes self-governance and the anonymity of the reviewers (referees) so as to discourage cronyism (i.e. bias shown to family and friends) and obtain an unbiased report. The reviewers are not selected from amongst the close colleagues/relatives/friends of the author. (p. 329) Hames (2012) accentuates that "Peer review in scholarly publishing is the process by which research output is subjected to scrutiny and critical assessment by individuals who are experts in those areas" (p. 20). Putting it in other words, Smith (2006) defines peer review as "something to do with a grant application or a paper being scrutinized by a third party - who is neither the author nor the person making a judgment on whether a grant should be given or a paper published" (p. 178). Also, Sciortino and Siemens (2013) believe that peer review "is a gate-keeper of the accepted body of scientific knowledge" (p. 225). Likewise, Trevino (2008) agrees that "peer review is an essential professional value and a duty to the profession" (p. 8). According to Herbert, Marsh, and Ball (1989), the peer review system fulfils four goals: (a) the selection of articles to be published in academic journals, (b) grant proposals to be funded, (c) individuals to be promoted, and (d) theses to be accepted as the requirements for higher degrees.

Taking the history of the peer review process into account, Schuhmann (2008) declares that the editors solely made the decisions on the rejection or publication of papers around the turn of last century and extensive review was not that much rampant; in other words, the peer review process was a private issue (Paltridge, 2017). The enforcement of peer review in academic setting leads back to approximately 300 years ago (Hames, 2012; Spier, 2002); in other terms, Leopold (2014) remarks that the peer review process roots in the 18th century. Based on Mulligan, Hall, and Raphael (2013), the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London was the first journal to perform the peer review process in assessing the academic staff. Boggs (2009) and Paltridge (2017) state that the peer review process was approved and recognized only in the late-20th century.

When an article is submitted to a journal, the editor might reject it at the initial stage (i.e., 'desk reject') or send it out for revisions by the peers. The peer reviewers could suggest publishing it as it is, they could require the authors to make some nominal corrections, or they could ask them to make major corrections. Also, Kumar, Rafiq, and Imam (2011) clarify that the typical publication process of journal submission is divided into three stages: the first stage is called pre-review (i.e., screening stage) in which the editor analyzes the article in terms of appropriateness of the subject and other generic features. The second stage called reviewing or negotiation loop where decisions on accepting, rejecting, minor corrections, major changes, or a combination of both are made; and post- review stage which includes processes for publication. The reviewers may be members of the journal's editorial advisory board or experts in the field published in the relevant domains.

If the reviewer is innominate for the author; that is, the author does not know who has reviewed the article, which is called a blind review (i.e., single-blind review). If the reviewers also do not know authors' identity either, it is called a double-blind review. If the author and the reviewers are aware of each other's identity, it is called an open peer review. For instance, an open peer review

is applied by Journals such as the British Medical Journal and Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics (Nature, 2006). Chowdhry (2015) acclaims:

In single-blind review, the reviewer identity is hidden to encourage unbiased comments, while in double-blind review, the author's identity is masked from reviewers to shield against forms of social bias. Further, an "open peer" review journal may employ a "third" party; i.e., someone who is neither affiliated directly with the reviewing entity nor associated with author being reviewed (p. 329).

Mandal, Giri, and Parija (2012) assume that the peer reviewers must be fully informed on their responsibilities as a peer reviewer. Not only must they be expert and knowledgeable in the concerned field, but also they must be vigilant on ethical aspects of research and report any encountered research malpractices or violation of ethics. Moreover, Sciortino and Siemens (2013) assert that the editors and potential peer reviewers must be transparent regarding their fields of interests and any conflicts of interest must be clarified initially. Besides, the reviewers must be dedicated and allocate adequate time and energy to commit a fair and reliable opinion. Guthrie, Parker, and Dumay (2015) express that one of the concomitant bases needed for the peer review process is trust and responsibility; however, peer reviewers are assigned to the role without appropriate guidance and awareness.

Based on Trevino (2008), devoting sufficient time and expertise while reviewing can lead to a great learning experience, as it exposes the reviewers to new thoughts and reflection, ideologies, literature, references, and data collection and analysis procedures and ultimately sparks new ideas for the future research. Similarly, Qing, Lifang, and Xiaochuan (2018) remark that through assembling of expertise of different experts, the peer review process can cover the editors' weaknesses in some specific aspects of knowledge and consequently increase the quality of academic journals. Analogous to other processes, the peer review process is also susceptible to several criticisms. Bornmann and Mungra (2011) assume that the peer review process undergoes several challenges including "its reliability and fairness; its standards, idiosyncratic and biased reviewer comments; its openness to innovation; timeliness of feedback and decisions; labour time and cost; reviewer workload; and detection of fraud and misconduct" (p.165). Besides, Paltridge (2017) suggests that the peer review process is slow, expensive, subjective, biased, and open to abuse. Hadi (2016) stipulates that because of the time- consuming nature of the peer review process and for the sake of accelerating the process, some editors may be required to recommend names of the suitable peer reviewers during manuscript submission. Some authors create fake email addresses managed by themselves; then, commit positive reports on their own manuscripts and finally get them accepted.

All these critics try to lead the peer review process to the level of constituting high- quality review. The overall thoughts of some of the reviewers cooperated in Human Resource Development Quarterly (2013) are expressed as following. Anderson suggests three characteristics for a qualified review: "balance critique with developmental intent, be open to difference, and provide feedback on a "top-to-bottom" basis" (p. 419). Furthermore, Werner accentuates that a qualified review should be honest, respectful, developmental, and timely. While Gubbins puts a great emphasis on the clarity of terms and contextual contribution as the factors leading to high quality, Lunn proves the two variables of the significance of the contribution to the field and (b) the extent to which the results of the study support the conclusions that the authors have made.

There exist a number of works examining the peer review process. For instance, Atjonen (2018) worked on the author experiences of the developmental feedback during the peer review process. The results approved the positive effects of peer-review process in terms of improving the quality

of the articles; however, the developmental feedback given to the authors needed to be emphasized more specifically. Kumar, Rafiq, and Imam (2011) focused on the main negotiation processes between the authors of articles and reviewers at the peer-reviewing stage. The results showed that the negotiations helped authors enhance the overall quality, clarity, and readability of their manuscripts.

Schwartz and Zamboanga (2015) explored ways to improve the peer review process. Mainly they scrutinized the editors' role in selecting the reviewers, adjusting their own impressions of the manuscript with the reviewers' feedback, and committing a fair and equitable editorial decision. Tan, Cai, Zhou, and Zhang (2019) investigated the relationship between the number of submissions and the overall standard of academic journals within a similar discipline. Bunner and Larson (2012) examined two online surveys, one for authors and the other for Editorial Board members to assess their perspectives on the quality and timeliness of peer review. The results revealed that perceptions of review quality among editorial board members and authors were similar, however, editorial board members were significantly more likely to rate reviewers as fair and unbiased.

Paltridge (2017) examined a study project by analyzing the reports written on submissions to the peer-reviewed journal 'English for Specific Purposes'. Reviewers also filled in a questionnaire that asked about their experience in doing peer reviews, how they had learned to write reviewers' reports, and the issues they faced in writing them. The results showed that over half of the reviewers had learned to do reviews by reading reviews of their own submissions to peer-reviewed journals. Others learnt to write reviews by just doing them, that is, by practice. The most challenging aspect for reviewers was writing reviewers' reports that were critical but still constructive. Tite and Schroter (2007) carried out a survey of peer reviewers from five biomedical journals to assess why reviewers accept or decline to review and their opinions on reviewers' incentives. Based on the results of this study, contribution of the paper to the subject area, relevance of topic to own work, and opportunity to learn something new were the main factors in deciding to accept a paper to review.

In line with all these studies, in this qualitative study, we try to contribute to the body of the knowledge on peer review through the peer reviewers' perceptions in an EFL context. Their experiences, preferences, opinions, and knowledge of reviewing are investigated. The following research questions are addressed:

1- How do EFL Iranian editorial members conceive of peer- reviewing process?
2- What are the most frequent challenges the reviewers encountered with in writing a review?
3- What are the criteria for accepting/rejecting the manuscripts?

2. METHOD

Design

In the current study, we adhered to a multiple case study design. According to this design, as Johnson and Christensen (2019) assert, it provides detailed investigation of the cases (i.e., reviewers in this study) and their perceptions of peer- reviewing process. Furthermore, the participants' perceptions were compared with each other for exploring their similar and different views toward peer-reviewing practice. As for a qualitative sampling scheme, we followed a criterion sampling strategy (Johnson & Christensen, 2019), and we gathered data from Iranian editorial board members of applied linguistics journals. It is claimed that this specific group of respondents has similar knowledge and skills in reviewing the manuscript. We sent 50 invitations to the members but 16 were agreed to cooperate with us. Of the total 16 respondents, 75% (n = 12) were male, and 25% were female (n= 4) who committed their answers within two weeks. We gave

the reviewers a consent letter at the beginning of the interview sessions. This sample size was enough to reach data saturation (see Patton, 1990)

Procedures

In order to explore what EFL reviewers had practiced and how they were able to apply their knowledge in reviewing articles, we developed an open-ended questionnaire, as one of most commonly used instruments in qualitative research (see Johnson & Christenson, 2019), based on the following steps. First, we conducted semi-instructed interviews with three experienced reviewers to develop the questions. Then, we added some items based on the related studies. To warrant the content validity of the items, two faculty members, who were all reviewers in different journals, were asked to comment on the items. The finalized version of the open-ended questionnaire was checked in terms of format, content, and appearance (Appendix I). The newly developed questionnaire was the main data gathering procedure, which was sent by an email to the editorial board members in journals. The data was gathered from Iranian editorial board members of science and research journals.

In this online survey, the e-questionnaire was sent by email to members of editorial boards of science and research journals, but because of the mass of their issues, just 16 reviewers cooperated in this study. Of the total 16 respondents, 75% (n = 12) were male, and 25% were female (n = 4) who committed their answers within two weeks.

3. RESULTS

In this section, the answers of the reviewers to the questions are analyzed. The answers to the questions 1 to 4 are categorized in Table 1.

According to Table 1, the respondents were all active in reviewing the articles, with a mean of 13.18 years of experience. More specifically, on average, they reviewed 15.5 articles in a year. Furthermore, they served 4.25 journals and spent approximately 5 hours for reviewing the articles.

Considering the question “What do you find most challenging about writing a review?” two major themes emerged under this category. They proposed two aspects: (a) those who considered challenges as one dimension (i.e., mono- aspectual reviewers), (b) those who considered challenges as Multidimensional (i.e., gestalt camp/multi-aspectual reviewers).

Mono-aspectual reviewers (n=10)

The reviewers in this category mentioned the following subthemes: (a) lack of academic literacy (n=3), (b) data analysis and discussion (n=2), (c) how to tone down criticisms (n=2), (d) making a final decision (n=1), (e) lack of novelty in articles (n=1), and (f) lack of comprehensiveness in reviewing the literature (n=1). These reviewers mentioned one of the above themes as the most challenging part of writing reviews. For example, one of the reviewers asserted that The most challenging part is when an author is not familiar with the ways a good research paper should be organized and written”, at the same time another respondent was more sensitive towards technicalities of research: “Evaluation of the more scientific and technical issues is the most challenging part of reviewing task.

Table 1: A Profile of Respondents' Activity in Reviewing the Assigned Articles

IDs	No. of reviews	Editorial boards	Experiencing in reviewing (years)	Time spent on a review
1	10	10	15	5
2	5	2	10	3
3	10	7	19	1
4	30	3	10	4
5	10	4	19	15
6	8	1	8	2
7	20	5	20	9
8	20	3	10	6
9	10	1	11	3
10	5	3	10	5
11	20	7	12	3
12	15	5	10	6
13	20	5	20	7
14	20	7	12	3
15	40	3	15	4
16	5	2	10	2
Mean	15.5	4.25	13.18	4.875

Gestalt reviewers/multi-aspectual reviewers (n=6)

In terms of the most challenging aspects of the reviewing task, they expressed a multi- aspectual list of issues simultaneously. For example, one of the reviewers claimed that You need to take both form and content into account at the same time.

Moreover, two other reviewers declared that All sections of the articles are challenging from the introduction to the conclusion, even to references"; "Spotting where the research is and where it says it is challenging. And, reviewing the 'discussion' 'interpretation' of findings/results needs much work. You need to examine the research identity deeply. Third, and for some, the choice of statistical procedures by the authors… might be a source of challenge and in a good number of occasions, confusion… Why this and why not that? What if a competing alternative were used?

Taking the sixth question into account, "What do you find most straightforward about writing a review?", we found three common themes based on the respondents' attitudes. The most frequent one was related to "checking whether authors follow the guidelines" (n=5, 31%). For example, two of the reviewers answered the question by saying that when the writers have followed the exact format of the journal selected and its guidelines to prepare a qualified article" and "Checking whether authors followed the guidelines proposed by journals is the most straightforward task we can do.

The second frequent theme was related to "evaluating research methodology" (n=4, 25%). Other aspects as "Spotting the shortcomings", "spotting the quality of writing", "evaluating the persuasiveness of arguments in articles", "checking references", and "making decisions" were also mentioned in interviewing sessions.

When they were asked "how did you learn peer-reviewing?" a majority of the respondents asserted that they learned peer-reviewing via field experiencing (n=8, 50%), looking at previous reviews (n=4, 25%), trial and errors (n=2, 12.5%), and looking at journal guidelines (n=2, 12. 5%), respectively (see Table 2). This signifies that the most frequent way to learn peer reviewing was related to field experience, while the least frequent patterns were related to trials and errors and looking at journal guidelines.

Table 2: Quantification of Learning Ways of Peer Reviewing

Learn to write a manuscript review	N	Percentage
Field experience	8	50
Looking at previous reviews	4	25
Trial and error	2	12.5
Looking at journal guidelines	2	12.5
Total	16	100

In terms of the reasons for rejecting/accepting a paper, five categories are implied based on the reviewers' responses. They acclaimed that they reject the assigned papers based on the following reasons: (a) Lack of being warrantied: This category which was the most common among the reasons (n=7, 43%), contained any criticisms made by a reviewer on inappropriate, missing, and inadequate evidence. (b) Lack of novelty: This subtheme which was the second most prevalent reason (n=5, 31%), was reflected in the assertions of two respondents:

I usually reject a paper if it does not have the necessary scientific merit.

I reject a paper if it doesn't add anything to the existing knowledge.

The categories of (c) Lack of sound methodology (n=4, 25%), (d) Lack of good language (n=3, 19%), and (e) Lack of transparency were considered as other reasons for not accepting a paper. When it comes to the acceptance of a manuscript, it can be inferred from the categories above that if a paper wants to be accepted, the following criteria should be regarded: supportiveness, novelty, sound methodology, transparency, and good language.

Regarding the characteristics of good research, we concluded nine key factors from the data. A majority of the respondents within this category characterized qualified research as: 'being rigorous and methodological', 'developing well-defined problems', 'being a systematic and organized inquiry', 'well- written', 'having an adequate reporting of literature review', 'being ethical and honest', 'being interpreted well', and 'possessing novelty'. For instance, two of the respondents, respectively, noted the primacy of the strict standards of research in the following words:

One that bears added value to the theory and/or practice of ELT, has adopted a sound methodology, includes an adequate description in each of the sections of the paper (introduction, literature review, method, results, discussion, and conclusion), is well- written, and of course does not contain plagiarism.

It should have a theoretical framework or a model; good and appropriate language; comprehensive review of literature; well- elaborated method and design; well- discussed and well-documented results; and finally, an overall conclusion section to elucidate the contribution of the results of the paper to a wide range of audience and the field under investigation.

The other two respondents considered more specific characteristics of good research:

It must be innovative in the sense that it raises important issues which are related to our field by adding something to our knowledge.
It must show a true commitment of the writers in the collection and analyses of the results supported by rich discussion.

Creative question and a new perspective on the topic should be considered. Besides a sound methodology, a persuasive statement of the problem and then a significant contribution to the current state of the topic under study would be most convincing.

Regarding the last question, "When do you refer a manuscript to another reviewer?" all the respondents asserted that when they do not have the necessary expertise in the field of a paper, they suggest an alternative reviewer. For instance, they declared the followings:

When I am not an expert in the field or I want to help the writers of the article If the manuscript is not within my expertise.
When the domain of the research is out of my expertise.
When I am not sure about my knowledge of the literature in contrast, two of the respondents did not suggest an alternative reviewer.

4. DISCUSSION

The peer review process is considered a filter for scientific research productions that improve the standard of academic journals; in other words, it is central to academic publishing. As peer review guarantees the quality of the work being considered for publication (Hames, 2012), it goes without saying that peer reviewing is here to stay because all quality journals have one form of such an activity for the researchers to go with in order to publish in such academic journals (Bush, 2016).

With the rapid growth of scholarly publishing and the importance of academic writing, the peer review system has gained a fundamental role. This study tried to shed light on the peer review process from the peer reviewers' perspective. As clarified earlier in the result section, succinct responses, based on the reviewers' point of view, it is concluded that an article should be well-established, systematic, and well- designed. The research questions should be defined thoroughly and the coherence and cohesion should be regarded. The researchers should also support their research with a suitable amount of literature review and commit a sound and delightful design encouraging the reader to read the rest of the research. The results of this study elucidated that the peer review system remains useful for ensuring the quality of articles. In Sarker's (2015) words, "it is important for aspiring authors to be aware of the priorities and preferences of the audience, including the editors and reviewers" (p. 201) if they want to create a successful authorship portfolio for themselves.

The findings of this study complement the results of Bornmann and Mungra (2011). They found that the underlying theory, design and structure of the study, and the concept of the study are of high importance for the reviewers for accepting or rejecting a paper. Therefore, the implication for the novice researchers is that they have to strictly stick to the foundational fundamentals of sound research in order for their work to be publishable. In line with what Samraj (2016) argues, the take-home message for the instructors of academic writing is to encourage the graduate students to keep on (re)working on different drafts their paper so as to make it meet the paper and publication standards required by the journal.

Furthermore, Herbert, Marsh, and Ball (1989) found that a qualified study should possess a good research method and a sound writing style based on the reviewers' perspectives. Moreover, the findings of the Mulligan, Hall, and Raphael's (2013) study are in line with the results of this study. They found that the peer review process is highly considered to be critical to scientific

research; the authors declared that the peer review process enhanced the last paper they published. The findings of other studies like Atjonen (2018), Kumar, Rafiq, and Imam (2011), Schwartz and Zamboanga (2009), Bunner and Larson (2012) also support the findings of this study.

In addition, from an academic writing instruction point of view, the findings of the current study give credit to what Paltrdige (2017) maintains with respect to the process of teaching and learning how to do peer review. He states that 'ways of doing' peer review depends on the specific context and discipline where the reviewers write reviews. In other words, both the values and expectations of the particular discipline must be met for "what 'counts' as research, how it should be framed, theorized, investigated as well as how it should be reported on" (p. 185). This contextual and particularist approach to academic writing will pay the price as the young and novice researchers move on the right track toward the right target (Hyland, 2015).

5. CONCLUSION

Two main implications could be implied from this study: one for journal authors, another for the reviewers. To produce a qualified academic work, the authors should be responsible for their work. Furthermore, the criteria obtained from our study besides those mentioned in other pertinent studies should be respected and followed. The authors should be trenchant in operating the prerequisites mentioned above of qualified academic production and the reviewers should be totally honest about their real opinion about the article under review, they should possess those characteristics mentioned in the review section (e.g., being faithful, timely, unbiased, responsible, knowledgeable, etc.).

In doing so, the reviewers must possess the necessary competence and mastery of their respective area(s) of interest and specialty, be the expert members of their scientific community, pay attention to the standards set by the particular journal, and consider all aspects of an acceptable and appropriate academic work to be publishable. In line with the agreed-upon sets of beliefs, values, and views of a specific discipline, what the reviewers write invoke certain structures of knowledge easily discernable by the members of that particular community (Frow, 2015). Therefore, the reviewers must take into account the disciplinary expectations of their particular field in the review reports that they prepare as the final outcome of their peer review practice.

Despite its pedagogical implications, this study is carried out on the reviewers from science and research journals. Thus, future studies should include other types of journals to enhance the study results. Our respondents were only Iranian reviewers. It is advisable to embrace international reviewers to examine their mindset towards peer-reviewing process.

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Appendix I: Open-Ended Questionnaire Items

How many reviews do you perform per year?
How many editorial boards do you serve on?
For how many years have you been writing reviews?
How much time do you spend on writing reviews?
What do you find most challenging about writing a review?
What do you find most straightforward about writing a review?
How did you learn to write a manuscript review?
On what grounds do you reject a manuscript?
On what grounds do you accept a manuscript?
In your view, what are the qualities of a good research paper?
When do you refer a manuscript to another reviewer?