

Evolving academic journal editorial systems

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Introduction

The process of academic publishing via peer review has a long history (Benos et al. 2007). However, the system of academic review and publishing, particularly in the wake of recent international scandals in medical research, has recently come under scrutiny (Benos et al. 2007). As Flowerdew (1999) points out, there is considerable interest in publishing academic articles through peer review in its various forms and thus analysis of journal editorial systems is relevant to various academic fields. In this research we expand the current scope of research into journals and peer review systems from attempts to quantitatively evaluate the effectiveness of peer review (Jefferson et al. 2002) or reviewers (Callaham et al. 1998) to qualitative descriptions of the communities of practice. Our intention is to develop and sustain journal communities through research into member attitudes toward roles and responsibilities concerning the editorial process.

This research represents the initial findings of an exploration, via a questionnaire survey, into creation and maintenance of a community of practice among senior editors and reviewers of *The Language Teacher* (TLT; a Japan-based JALT publication), *Asian EFL Journal* (AEJ), and *Asian ESP Journal* (AESPJ; both Pan-Asian, free access internet-based journals). The journals researched are unaffiliated with large publishing houses and are managed and run by volunteers.

We feel the questionnaire employed in this research represents one means towards maintenance of the various journal communities, which can inform senior editors of attitudes towards reviewing, journal positioning, and other issues raised by respondents. We also hope to describe the systems in place at the journals which encourage a healthy community of practice.

Our paper will first review literature into internal perceptions by editors about author-editor collaboration, perceptions of journal quality, discourse communities, and communities of practice. Then we will describe the research methodology of the questionnaire employed in this research. In our discussion we will present criteria identified by reviewers as important when evaluating a manuscript, issues involved in the

assessment of the language of a manuscript, and important characteristics of papers recommended for acceptance or rejection. We will also discuss issues of journal positioning relative to other academic journals in the field. Our conclusions and implications finish by suggesting ways to nourish and sustain communities of practice, and challenge editors from other journals to share similar accounts of their editorial systems in order to make the process of publishing articles and evaluating journal positioning more transparent.

Literature review

As this study investigates journal editorial systems internally, we will look at research in the field of academic discourse, discourse community, and community of practice, issues broadly related to themes laid down in the questionnaire. Previous research into the editorial and review process (Rentz 2005) and how journal quality is perceived by editors and readers (Rogers et al. 2007) is helpful in understanding internal and external perspectives into the management and positioning of a journal in its field. This research supplements existing literature by considering how editors and reviewers can contribute to evolving the systems in which they work by stressing the concept of community.

Rentz (2005) looked at collaboration between *Journal of Business Communication* (Sage Publications) editors and authors, revealing that diversity existed among editors as to perceptions of their roles and responsibilities when reviewing academic papers. Some took the stance that they should be 'gate-keepers' of the journal by adopting a 'hands off' role in collaborating with authors (Rentz 2005: 290), whilst others felt that they were 'highly invasive' and were virtually 'co-authors' (290). Editors commented on the difficulty of 'balancing the role of gate-keeper and mentor' (Rentz 2005: 291) with authors. Although it was recognized that authors should welcome feedback in order for their work to be accepted, it was advised that they retain 'primary ownership' (291).

Rogers et al. (2007), in research into the same journal editors' perceptions of journal quality, investigated external factors which impacted upon those perceptions. Their study showed how accreditation in Thomson Scientific's Social

Science Citation Index played a powerful role in the reputation of journals in various fields. Rogers et al. (2007) recognize the importance of Thomson Scientific's Impact Factor in ranking a journal but advocate more qualitative measures of journal quality, especially consideration of the perceptions of academic peers regarding the value of articles published.

Our study takes the issues internal and external to a journal raised by Rentz (2005) and Rogers et al. (2007) and suggests that perceptions of quality can be enhanced by including editorial members and authors in a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) which is flexible and open. Research into the academic genre norms created in communities originates in literature on 'discourse communities' (Flowerdew 2000: 128). Flowerdew (2000) refers to discourse community in research investigating how a researcher interacts with journal peers, in particular how the author needs to conform to the norms and procedures laid down by that journal's internal community. Such a community is frequently exclusive since it upholds and defends academic writing norms, creating what Carter (1995: 55) terms 'narrow vocationalism' in a 'rigid and deterministic' (57) manner. These genre-based writing practices are intended as a means to apprentice newcomers into that community, yet serve only to 'produce unreflective writers who will be able to do no more than sustain the genres' (Carter 1995: 55).

The norms of academic writing as upheld by a journal's 'discourse community' are exclusive in nature and lead to conservative writing practice. Nunn and Adamson (2007) challenged this concept of exclusivity in the *AEJ* March 2008 edition by publishing papers written in a variety of genres, including first-person (Nunn 2008). Such counter-measures to the rigidity of a discourse community are signs of an emergent community of practice in which 'legitimate peripheral participation' is practised (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29). This less exclusive notion of participation embraces the idea of giving legitimacy to authors on the periphery of the community. Flowerdew (2000) points out that when managing a community of practice, members at the 'apex' (131) should allow themselves to be challenged by fellow editors and authors about valid academic discourse. This flexibility towards norms of writing requires that 'even experienced scholars need to continually negotiate their position as members of the discourse community' (Flowerdew 2000: 131). Davies (2005: 567) views this as healthy behaviour as it creates a 'safe environment in which to make mistakes, and

gradually extend and normalize your practice'. However, Hay (1996) and later Davies (2005) maintain that the apex of a community of practice is inherently rigid in giving access to the community, gate-keeping standards, and its hierarchy. This is denied by Eckert and Wenger (2005: 584) who refute the static nature of Davies' interpretation, pointing out that the progression from the periphery to the centre is not linear, but is constantly under negotiation:

The regime of competence...does not evolve uniformly as an underlying structure, but dynamically as a social system.

This implies that there is an organic element to issues of competence and legitimacy in good communities of practice which fundamentally oppose the conservative maintenance of the status quo. Wenger (1998: 73) indicates that communities of practice exist when 'people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another', termed by Bazerman (1980: 657) as 'conversations'. There is then an overwhelming sense that a good community of practice in journal editing is one in which the common goals and norms of the discourse community are intentionally nebulous, allowing for wider inclusion of minority viewpoints. This is the 'critical' perspective (Flowerdew 2007: 22) in academic writing practice. Flowerdew (2007) argues, however, that writers of English as an Additional Language who struggle with academic writing norms would benefit from a 'critical pragmatic approach' (23) as advocated by Harwood and Hadley (2004) which encourages a 'critical mind-set' (Flowerdew 2007: 23) towards a journal's writing norms yet informs authors of the possible consequences of challenging editorial feedback.

To encourage the 'conversation' (Bazerman 1980) and develop the sense of community, we propose research should be conducted on a regular basis to investigate editorial procedures and elicit opinions from members, potentially challenging current editorial practice. We also argue the results of such research should be transparently acted upon through the community of practice. It is to this research that the next section turns.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was questionnaire-based and distributed via email, as the target editors and reviewers are geographically widespread and the regular business of the

journals is conducted via email. Edwards and Owen (2002) have defended this kind of questionnaire methodology, outlining its inherent weaknesses and explaining why the benefits of the information gathered outweigh the limitations of the research instrument. The questionnaire, reproduced in Table 1, was originally sent to *AEJ* editors in 2006 for research by Nunn and Adamson (2007). The insights from that research were beneficial for *AEJ*'s internal editorial system, so it was expanded to *AESPJ* in 2008. An Associate Editor with *AESPJ*, Theron Muller, saw the potential benefit of gathering data from *TLT*. Thus data was gathered from the editorial teams of three publications.

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1. What are the three most important criteria you use to evaluate the quality of a paper?
 2. What is the most sensitive aspect of reviewing for you personally?
 3. Can you describe a specific example of a dilemma you have faced when evaluating a paper?
 4. Explain the importance you give to language in evaluating a paper.
 5. A paper should always be rejected if:
 6. A paper should never be rejected if:
 7. Does the (inter)national nature of the journal create any sensitive review issues for you?
 8. Comments
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Table 1: Questionnaire

There are some semantic differences regarding the roles and responsibilities of the editorial teams between *TLT*, *AEJ*, and *AESPJ*. *TLT* has Co-Editors who coordinate review of manuscripts and liaising with authors, and an Editorial Advisory Board that reviews manuscripts. *AEJ* and *AESPJ* are organized so that Senior and Associate Editors coordinate manuscript review and liaising with authors, while Editors are responsible for reviewing manuscripts. For the purposes of this discussion, editor refers to the *TLT* Co-Editors and *AEJ*, *AESPJ* Senior and Associate Editors, or the part of the team in charge of liaising with authors. Reviewer refers to members of the *TLT* Editorial Advisory Board and *AEJ*, *AESPJ* Editors, or those responsible for reviewing manuscripts. All the publications involved employ what Benos et al. (2007) refer to as blind, anonymous review, where author identities are not revealed to manuscript reviewers (blind), and

where reviewers' identities are not revealed to authors (anonymous review).

We were interested in eliciting criteria used for review, sensitive issues or dilemmas, author language, beliefs regarding rejection, and any wider issues about journal positioning. Regarding question 7, questionnaires sent to *TLT* reviewers asked about the 'national nature of the journal' as *TLT* is Japan-based. *AEJ* and *AESPJ* receive submissions from many Asian countries so the question read 'international'. Question 8 represents space for open comments. 42 responses were received in total, 14 from *AEJ* (out of 40 sent), 12 from *AESPJ* (out of 28), and 16 from *TLT* (out of 28).

Results and discussion

Since this research is ethnographic in nature and qualitative by design, rather than employing a counting system for analysis, the questionnaire results were first collated by journal, including both majority opinions and interesting minority comments, then the results from the individual journals were compiled into a summary of the research results across journals, incorporating both majority and minority comments. Table 2 gives an example of the final collated data for question 1 of our questionnaire.

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1. What are the three most important criteria you use to evaluate the quality of a paper?

In reply to this first question, more than three common criteria were pinpointed across the three journals: Organization, originality, relevance of the study to the journal and its audience, applicability of the study, sound research methodology, a thorough literature review and interpretation of the study's findings, and adherence to the journal's style sheet were the most commonly mentioned criteria. Also, of some importance but specific to individual journals, were the following: Linking the study's findings to Asian contexts (*AEJ*, *AESPJ*), 'clarity of writing' (*TLT* respondents), following 'an academic writing style' which is easy to read (*AEJ*), and finally one *AESPJ* reviewer who stressed that the 'rhetorical style' of a paper should reflect the author's stance and voice.

Table 2: Example of final collated data for all journals for question 1

Rather than cover each question in turn in which common themes overlap, we will organize our results thematically, dealing first with responses concerning the review process and second with issues relating to reviewer roles.

Reflection on the review process

This section concerns manuscript evaluation criteria, including a discussion of language concerns and then shares features that influence acceptance or rejection of submissions.

Regarding criteria for evaluation, all the journals involved in this study use a list of criteria for rating manuscripts. *TLT* uses eight criteria while *AEJ* and *AESPJ* use nine. The criteria identified by the respondents are included in Table 3, which also indicates how they are explicitly addressed in the journals' evaluation forms.

Respondent criteria	<i>TLT</i> reviewer evaluation form	<i>AEJ</i> & <i>AESPJ</i> reviewer evaluation form
Organization	Methodology, design, or approach	Complete, clear and well organized presentation
Originality	Relevance of problem addressed	Significance of the problem
Relevance to journal and audience (<i>AEJ</i> & <i>AESPJ</i> : link to Asia)	Suitability for <i>TLT</i> readership; addresses practical concerns (two separate criteria)	Applicability and interest to the field (relevance beyond case presented)
Methodology	Methodology, design, or approach	Appropriateness of research design and method
Literature review	Review of published research (if applicable)	Literature review demonstrates a clear relationship between problem and other relevant literature
Interpretation of findings	Conclusions or discussion	Accurate and useful interpretation
Stylistic issues	Follows APA style sheet	Does the paper follow APA style?

Table 3: Criteria for evaluation of a manuscript

Table 3 indicates there is a match between criteria identified by the reviewers and the criteria in the official evaluation forms. The *TLT* evaluation form has two criteria associated with relevance, and one criterion split between organization and methodology. Stylistic issues in evaluation represent the most problematic criteria for us as editor participants in this research despite this category representing the least informative of the criteria on the evaluation sheet: on the sheets, for all journals, the question specifically addresses whether the paper under review follows APA style, but respondent opinions toward language when reviewing papers raised much deeper issues

than the current question can accommodate. We will expand on this below.

Language and style concerns

For all the journals, there was some mention of a need to maintain an 'appropriate' or 'correct' 'academic genre', 'style', or 'tone'. Related to this theme, both a *TLT* and an *AEJ* respondent raised the issue of receiving submissions which were clearly MA assignments and not submitted in the journal's submission format. The *AEJ* reviewer questioned whether submissions from MA students should be encouraged. This raises the issue of how a reviewer evaluating a blind submission would recognize a submission as being an assignment from an MA programme. Similarly, Flowerdew (2000: 131) mentions that there exists an 'intellectual dislocation' for graduates upon leaving their universities where they have been nurtured into an academic community. Leaving this community and attempting to publish their research in journals exposes such graduates to learning new academic norms. If a 'conversation' (Bazerman 1980: 657) takes place between MA graduates and journal editors about such norms, then participation as a temporary peripheral member can happen without conflict between university writing norms and submission guidelines.

Many *AEJ* and *AESPJ* respondents saw language as either the 'most important' or a 'primary factor' in evaluating papers since the journals are related to language issues, summarized in two individual responses that 'poor language can influence a reviewer's judgment' (*AEJ*) and 'poor language clouds meaning' (*AESPJ*). Some *AESPJ* respondents stated they do not mind 'cleaning up' language slips, errors, or mistakes, but one *AEJ* reviewer expressed a dislike of 'proofreading' papers.

With *TLT*, there was mention of native speakers of English (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English. The comments were that NNS authors should have their papers checked by a NS prior to submission. Individual responses included one reviewer who claimed to be more 'sympathetic' towards NNS writers and another who would 'rate a paper down' written by a NS who made language errors. This is problematic when considering Flowerdew's (2000) description of how a journal reviewer classified a researcher as a NNS, while the researcher considered himself a NS.

Finally, respondents from all journals wrote that language should be clear and easy to understand, although a number of *TLT*

respondents said the ideas in a paper were more important than the language, one response stating that 'the editors will fix up the language' and another that they 'pay no attention to style' when reviewing. A *TLT* reviewer summed up this sentiment by saying 'poor language cannot be equated with poor thinking'.

Final evaluation: Accept or reject?

In regards to final evaluation of a manuscript, respondents indicated it is a challenge to give balanced feedback that is diplomatic and constructive. They also identified criteria which would necessitate a positive or negative review, discussed in more detail below.

Responses indicated there are two common criteria which lead to a positive review, including clear and easy to understand language and original content that makes a contribution to the field. *AEJ* and *AESPJ* respondents indicated they are interested in papers which are clearly contextualized and that are coherent, well-argued, and reference up-to-date literature. One *TLT* respondent explained that 'engaging and convincing writing' should be the priority for evaluation, as *TLT* is less academic than *JALT*'s other journal, *JALT Journal*, and another mentioned the importance of accepting papers which are 'political and provocative'. One clear difference can be seen between the attitudes of one *TLT* and one *AESPJ* reviewer. The *TLT* respondent complained of too many papers which investigate small-scale cases which cannot be generalised to a wider population; in contrast, an *AESPJ* reviewer said papers should not be rejected 'if a writer addresses an issue that may benefit his/her community and not those of developed communities'.

Respondents from all journals indicated that plagiarism should lead to immediate rejection. Reviewers from all journals, although slightly more from *TLT*, indicated 'unreadable' papers or papers containing 'incomprehensible' language should be rejected. Some comments also said a paper should be rejected if the reviewer feels it is unredeemable. Another common ground for rejection was if the organization, research methodology, literature review, or data interpretation were considered beyond the ability of the author to amend. Further reasons for rejection included: authorial bias (*AESPJ*), impolite attacks on other researchers (*AESPJ*), a lack of 'reflection' (*AEJ*), an absence of practical implications (*AEJ*), and if the study is 'unethical' (*TLT*).

Reflection on reviewer roles

Responses shared several common concerns across the journals, including giving diplomatic and constructive feedback to papers which required revisions or which were recommended for rejection, reviewing a paper outside a reviewer's area of expertise, and difficulties evaluating well-written papers whose methodology sections were poorly devised or whose topics were not relevant to the journal.

There was also some mention of journal positioning. An *AEJ* and some *TLT* respondents indicated it is necessary to balance the role of gatekeeping on the one hand and mentoring of new authors on the other. As one *AESPJ* respondent put it, 'we have to maintain a certain standard', while another *AESPJ* respondent reflected the opposite view that 'yardsticks for publishing articles are based on the expectations and standards derived from developed countries' and that *AESPJ* should be 'keen on hearing voices from the centre and periphery'. Another concern unique to *TLT*, perhaps because of the wording of the question regarding *TLT*'s 'national nature', was whether *TLT* was international and if the journal should 'rise to the challenge' of an international journal, while other respondents recommended writers keep the 'national nature' of *TLT* in mind.

Another concern unique to *TLT* was one comment about how 'the line between editing and co-authoring begins to blur' when extensive content-based as well as language amendments are necessary to raise the standard of a submission. Another *TLT* respondent said, 'the overlap of editor and writing coach that is a feature of all *JALT* publications is problematic. *JALT* publications endeavor to encourage colleagues and support novice writers, but we on the editorial review team must also be gatekeepers', a dilemma echoed by Rentz (2005) and Flowerdew (2000).

AEJ and *AESPJ* respondents also mentioned the issue of unsuccessful blinding, where reviewers can guess the identities of the authors despite removing names and affiliations from manuscripts for review. This is an issue discussed in some depth by Benos et al. (2007), who indicate that successful blinding in all cases is unlikely.

Single responses worth noting are that one *TLT* reviewer referred to international journal publishing as a 'cesspool', and one *AEJ* reviewer cast doubt on the 'caliber' of other reviewers and the knowledge base of '75–80%' of all papers reviewed – comments which, as editors, we found insensitive toward the journals' communities.

More positively, one *TLT* respondent commented that completing this questionnaire

constituted good development and awareness-raising and that it could possibly be extended to authors. Another *TLT* reviewer advocated not only more guidance for writers, but also mentoring for reviewers and editors, particularly new ones. One *AESPJ* reviewer wanted to see the whole process of a journal submission including evaluation, revision, re-evaluation to final publication.

Moving from the periphery to the core

As Editors at the core of the journal communities under investigation, we hope to use our findings to improve our respective journal communities. Based on these findings, there are several points which demonstrate how this research represents a form of development and indicates how we can encourage a greater sense of community.

- Request to see whole process under consideration (*AEJ*).
- Consider how the journals can legitimize views of peripheral members.
- Explain blinding is not always successful (Benos et al. 2007).
- Identify and resolve problematic beliefs: ‘cesspool’, criticism of submitted manuscripts and other reviewers.
- Explicitly share and develop journal roles and positioning (*AESPJ*, *TLT*).
- Anonymously share comments among reviewers of the same article (*AESPJ*, *TLT*).
- Innovate evaluation forms to reflect problematic issues of language beyond APA style.
- Encourage discussion and resolution of difficulties outlined by respondents, including:
 1. How to develop constructive comments to authors with problematic papers
 2. Research ethics
- Consider innovations implemented elsewhere:
 1. Signed reviews
 2. Unmasking reviewer identity
 3. Open reviewing

In addition to these potential innovations for creating more egalitarian communities of practice, some measures have been undertaken which postdate the current research. In 2007 a blog was created for editors and reviewers to exchange academic information (calls for papers and conferences, comments on editorial procedure and papers published). Additionally, one journal related to *AEJ*, *The Linguistics Journal*, decided to publish a special edition for which editorial responsibility was offered to non-senior staff including normal reviewers. For *AESPJ*, decision-making on policy changes (submission length) has been done by soliciting views from Associate Editors rather than making that decision at the Senior Editorial level. Finally, there exists a shadowing system of introducing new *AESPJ* reviewers to their roles and responsibilities. This has some resonance with Bazerman’s (1980: 657) ‘conversations’.

Implications and conclusions

This paper has demonstrated how, as apex members of our respective journals, we have undertaken research to better understand member perceptions of roles and responsibilities within our communities. Our research has indicated that the manuscript evaluation criteria used reflect those outlined in the official evaluation forms, but that language as a category is currently problematic. Also, there are some areas which, if addressed, could lead to a stronger consensus among members and perhaps a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges authors face as legitimate peripheral members of the community, including reviewer attitudes toward mentoring versus gate keeping, NS versus NNS issues, and criteria used for final evaluation of a manuscript. Future possibilities for expanding the current research include: inviting authors to comment on the review and editorial process; expanding the scope of the questionnaires to more members of staff, such as the proofreading teams; and evaluating the influence of potential interventions, such as explaining difficulties of blinding. Finally, we hope other communities within academic publishing can benefit from the methodology and findings employed here. As a body of similar research develops, there is the potential for resonance, leading to a better understanding of how communities of practice can be effectively formed and sustained within journals.

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