SELECTED PAPERS

Developing Competence in Journal Reviewing

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This study addresses reviewer development programs at 2 Asia-based English language teaching (ELT) journals which aim to raise awareness of peer review language. Little discussion or research about competence or standards in peer review exists, so developing competence for new reviewers is difficult. This research addresses how novice reviewers of manuscripts develop an understanding of appropriate feedback language by analyzing written review discourse in reviewer development programs. Attention is paid to how reviewers are socialized into their responsibilities through interactions with review mentors, reflecting upon their feedback to authors over several practice reviews. The focus of the analysis is on changes to review language through correspondence between mentor and mentee. The process by which this analysis has been conducted and its outcomes may carry important messages for authors, reviewers, potential reviewers interested in the peer review process, and senior editors interested in issues of quality in peer review.

本研究は、アジアに拠点を置く英語教育（ELT）の分野の2誌のジャーナルで行われている査読開発プログラムについて検討するものである。このプログラムの目的は、同僚(研究者仲間による）評価における言語の問題についての認識を高めることである。この分野の能力や基準についてほとんど議論されていないため、新米査読委員が実力を付けていくことが難しい現状にある。本研究では、査読開発プログラムを通して、どのように新米査読委員が能力を高め、自信をつけ、査読する際に求められる書き方が理解できたかを談話分析の手法を使って検討する。新人が何回か練習を積み重ね、どのようにベテランであるメンターの指導を反映させて、この分野において能力を伸ばすことができるかに焦点を当てている。このような過程における分析は、投稿者にも影響を与えるであろうし、査読者やこれから査読者を目指す研究者、さらに編集主任にとっても同僚査読の質については興味関心が持たれる問題である。

THIS PAPER describes an investigation of the socialization of academic peer reviewers into the process of evaluating articles submitted to academic journals in ELT. Academic journals internationally face pressure to find qualified reviewers to accommodate increases in submissions (Zuengler & Carroll, 2010). One challenge facing senior editors is how to develop newly recruited reviewers, as reviews themselves are an "occluded" (Swales, 1996, p. 46) genre because they are typically only shared with authors and among journals' editorial staff. Thus socialization into doing academic reviewing is problematic, with reviewers desiring training, feedback, and support but not necessarily receiving it (Freda, Kearney, Baggs, Broome, & Dougherty, 2009). This leads to reviewers drawing on their own experience of being evaluated when writing their own reviews (Lovejoy, Revenson, & France, 2011). As a consequence, this can lead to overzealous, "pit-bull" reviewing (Walbot, 2009, p. 24) if new re-

viewers mimic aggressively worded review feedback from their own pursuit of publication or from university tutors.

In light of these issues, this research describes efforts at two Asia-based journals, *Asian EFL Journal* (*AEJ*) and *JALT Conference Proceedings* (*JALTCP*), to implement support programs for new reviewers to familiarize them with the conventions of the genre and to encourage more sensitive reviewing. The objective of this study is to investigate how these mentoring programs shape the review language of new reviewers. Analysis of the discourse between mentor and mentees during the program forms the primary data for this investigation.

This paper begins with an introduction to the journals under investigation, a background of the authors (senior editors who instigated the programs), and a description of the programs themselves. This is followed by a brief review of literature surrounding academic publication and peer review. Then the methodology employed for this investigation is presented with justification for its choice. Findings are discussed in the form of three "critical incidents" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327) of interest to us as investigators. We conclude with an overall evaluation of the potential of this kind of development program for preparing reviewers for the task of completing academic reviews.

The Journals, Senior Editors, and Development Programs

AEJ is an online peer-reviewed journal which has been in operation since 2002. It has 12 Associate Editors and currently 88 reviewers. Implemented by a Senior Editor, John Adamson, the mandatory development program for new reviewers involves completing two reviews of old submissions, comparing new reviewers' feedback to that given by the original reviewers, and reflecting upon the differences and similarities in dialogue with a Senior Editor. After this, reviewers are activated to do real reviews and paired with an experienced reviewer in a mentor–mentee relationship for their first reviews. The *JALTCP* is an annual publication with around 100 reviewers overseen by two Review Coordinators and one Senior Editor. There are additional editors who work with manuscripts after review has been completed who aren't discussed here. The *JALTCP* mentoring program, implemented by Theron Muller, Review Coordinator from 2009 to 2011, is based on the *AEJ* program, although key differences are that it is optional for new reviewers, reviewers themselves decide when they are ready to start regular reviewing, and while review mentors are available for consultation, they are only assigned to those new reviewers who request such support. The data for this study emanates from practice reviews and correspondence surrounding them from both mentoring programs.

Literature Review

Interest in academic review is interdisciplinary, with one thread of the literature comprising medical journals concerned with review standards (Benos et al., 2007). Another thread concerns issues of non-Anglophone scholars struggling to publish in English (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Belcher, 2007; Flowerdew, 2008; Canagarajah, 2005). This research into English language publishing investigates issues surrounding authorial identity and the ethical nature of pressuring scholars to shift from writing in their L1 to writing in academic English, falling under the broader umbrella of "academic literacies" (Turner, 2010, p. 19) research. Both threads inform this study which focuses on how Anglophone and non-Anglophone scholars can be effectively socialized into doing peer review.

To develop reviewers, the norms of academic writing in EFL/Applied Linguistics journals needs to be understood. Yet often reviewers are expected to start reviewing without socialization into what this responsibility entails (Freda et al., 2009), which leads to a lack of consensus about review quality (Lovejoy et al., 2011). As

a consequence, new, inexperienced reviewers frequently request training, feedback, and support for how they evaluate journal submissions (Freda et al., 2009). Without such support, reviewers may refer to guidance they received as authors themselves, such as from university when tutored into their disciplinary norms, a "conversation of the discipline" (Bazerman, 1980, p. 657) that may not be appropriate in the genre of peer review for publication. Such default standards are in essence based on a wide diversity of experiences which may range from receiving harsh feedback from tutors or reviewers to feedback which gently mentored them. Our concern is that, as editorial staff responsible for inducting new reviewers and maintaining quality reviewing among our journals' staff, the reliance on default standards may result in a disservice to authors. Of particular concern is the tendency of many reviewers towards "pit-bull" (Walbot, 2009, p. 1) assessment, where their reviews only identify errors and offer little praise for positive aspects of the papers evaluated.

The challenge of reviewer development is how to raise awareness among new reviewers about how to give constructive, yet critical review feedback. One first step along this path was to survey review staff about their perceptions of reviewing to find out about existing reviewer diversity. Research from Nunn and Adamson (2009) and Adamson and Muller (2012) into *JALTCP* and *AEJ* reviewers' perceptions provided us with findings indicating some reviewers saw their responsibilities as strict gatekeepers of "standards," whereas others felt more comfortable as mentors and co-constructors of knowledge alongside authors. As Senior Editors, we felt uncomfortable with the concept of "standards" as a measure of article quality, because it was not clear whose standards were evoked and toward what ends. This is a theme addressed with respect to the power imbalance between center and periphery scholarship (Canagarajah, 2005), and how the identities of authors of such scholarship are identified by journal reviewers, even when reviews are anonymous (Tardy & Matsuda, 2009). We feel instead that our journals should respect authors and promote sensitivity to a multitude of ideas and perspectives, global and local.

The investigations described above form the impetus for this research, initiating reviewer development through mentoring. Findings from the mentoring program at *AEJ* (Adamson, 2012) reveal the positive impact of pairing new reviewers with more experienced mentors on the language of review feedback, in particular writing constructive and sensitive language to authors even in cases of rejection. However, there is also a danger that mentee reviewers may mimic the harsh language of their mentors (Adamson, 2012). In this sense, questions are raised as to when senior editors in charge of the development program should intervene in the mentoring process and to what extent a mentoring program is effective in raising review quality. It is to those issues which we now turn.

Investigative Methodology

This investigation followed interactions between review mentors and mentees at the *AEJ* (23 new reviewers) and the *JALTCP* (5 new reviewers). Mentoring was chosen as a means for reviewer development because it directly extends the "conversation of the discipline" (Bazerman, 1980, p. 657) to include the active involvement of new reviewers through dialog. This dialog, in turn, serves as discourse data which can be used to describe how the mentoring process shapes new reviewer language. With both journals the new reviewers completed mock practice reviews then shared their feedback with their review mentors, whose role was to further correspond with them on the contents of their reviews, sharing their own mock reviews of the papers. This correspondence in turn became part of the data analysis. The papers were taken from actual submissions to the journals, and so the original reviews of those manuscripts were also shared with mentors and mentees, along with the final editorial decision regarding those manuscripts.

Data collection involved the editorial coordinators of the process being sent copies of all email correspondence between the review mentors and mentees. Research participants were aware that their data was being collected and that the intention was to investigate the correspondence between program participants. Enrolment in the research was optional and efforts were made to keep the mentors, mentees and authors of the papers anonymous in all research reports and publications.

Because of the qualitative nature of this investigation, there was far more data than could be synthesized into a single publication emerging from this research. Thus a decision was made to focus on "critical incidents" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327), which involves "collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). In our case this meant focusing on key stretches of discourse which revealed the attitudes and beliefs of participants and potential changes in stance toward peer review language amongst new reviewers. We felt these critical incidents illuminative of the mentor–mentee relationship and how mentees were socialized into the language of peer review. Thus this represents a kind of action research. We are wary of the problematizing tendencies of action research in treating the researched as objects with some deficiency which the research is expected to uncover, and thus instead we have taken an "appreciative inquiry" (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001) stance toward this investigation, asking what processes are at work in the mentor–mentee correspondence and how we can encourage development of the programs "from competence to excellence" (Tait, 2002, p. 153).

Results

Three critical incidents were selected from the data for the insights they offer into the reviewer mentoring process. These were interactions in the data where there was evidence of concern on the part of the new reviewers and their mentors regarding review language and the positioning of reviewers with respect to the authors whose manuscripts they were evaluating. These are described and discussed below.

Critical Incident One

The first critical incident is taken from mentor–mentee correspondence from the *AEJ* mentoring program. The mentor, an experienced Japanese reviewer, corresponded with his mentee, a new reviewer to the journal from Singapore who was reviewing his first submission. The mentee had sent his evaluation comments to the mentor and had included the following comments on the literature review section of the paper:

> *Mentee evaluation:* The literature review is scanty on findings of empirical studies and showed a lack of research depth. The authors relied heavily on unsupported claims, including a few fallacious conclusions.

In response to the mentee's language use in the above extract, the mentor wrote the following comments:

> *Mentor suggested marginal comment to author:* I just wondered if there is any substantial data evidence that supports this claim. Such a claim needs to be well-grounded with some statistical data or research findings relevant to the issue in question.

These comments did not directly address the mentee's language itself, focusing instead on the content of the feedback concerning "unsupported claims." Here, the mentor clearly concurs with the mentee on a content level, yet uses language such as "I just wondered if," and "needs to be well-grounded." This is unambiguous and clear language which is nevertheless much less direct than the vocabulary used by the mentee; "scanty," "lack

of research depth," and "fallacious." This presents to the mentee a model of more sensitive language use whilst supporting the mentee's judgement on the content of the paper. Summing up the mentee's feedback in later email correspondence, the mentor praises the mentee for his evaluation and downplays his feedback to the mentee as follows:

> *Mentor email communication with mentee:* Well, your evaluative comments are very clear and reasonable, so I just added a little bit of my comments on your evaluation sheets.

This technique of praising the mentee achieves the objective of verifying the mentee's overall evaluation of the paper whilst providing subtle modelling of more sensitive language use.

Critical Incident Two

In this critical incident, from the *JALTCP*, both mentor and mentee are Japan-based Anglophone scholars. The mentor has extensive experience of writing for publication and peer reviewing, and has been part of the *JALTCP* team for more than 5 years. Below, the mentee uses a marginal comment to suggest changes to an author's original sentence:

> *Author original sentence:* In fact, most recent writing on [the topic of the paper] argues [for a particular methodology] and that they should have [specific characteristics].

> *Mentee marginal comment:* Might strengthen the point to cite such recent research here

The mentor responds with a marginal comment, addressed to the reviewer mentee, encouraging the use of stronger language, also providing a model addressed to the author.

> *Mentor marginal comment to mentee:* In this manuscript, there is very little data or references to the claims—which I really don't care for! In this case, I would be a little more forceful.

> *Mentor marginal comment to author:* Reference, provide data, or rephrase the sentence.

The mentor and mentee then had an email exchange regarding the nature of the language used in requesting authorial changes to manuscripts:

> *Mentee email response:* OK, so from what I can discern, I don't need to be quite so polite . . . . I think the gentle nature of the feedback which I received on my MA influenced my tone.

> *Mentor email reply:* Please be polite but a little more forceful . . . BTW, if you got such polite feedback on your MA thesis, I envy you very much! The people at [University X] ripped into us—it was a bloodbath . . .

Considering the author's original sentence, mentor and mentee both picked up on the lack of referencing when referring to "most recent writing on" the topic of the paper and correctly noted that references should be added to back up the author's claim. The mentee used "might" which the mentor felt could be construed by the author as a suggestion, not a requirement for revising the paper, and suggests an alternative imperative sentence, "Reference, provide data, or rephrase the sentence." The follow-up correspondence via email shows that both based their evaluative practices on their experience of evaluation when completing their graduate degrees, with the mentee having had "gentle" feedback in her formal assessments and the mentor's experience having been "ripped into."

As review coordinators, we find this incident informative because, as Lovejoy et al. (2011) suggest, both review mentor and mentee are drawing on their experiences from graduate school to make decisions regarding what language to use in their reviews. Furthermore, this incident provides a counterbalance to Critical Incident One, where the review mentor is requesting more forceful language on the part of the mentee, rather than softer language, thus providing evidence that the mentoring process pushes reviewer mentees in both directions, toward more gentle language and also toward more direct language. How we feel about this as review coordinators is discussed below.

Critical Incident Three

Critical incident three, also taken from the JALTCP, involves the same review mentor from critical incident two encouraging a different review mentee, also a Japan-based Anglophone scholar, to expand on his review comments.

> *Author original sentence:* Before we go any further I think it prudent to explain the system and how the program works at my school.
>
> *Mentee marginal comment:* Reword
>
> *Mentor marginal comment to author:* This is too casual/colloquial in tone and should be rephrased.
>
> *Mentor comment to mentee:* . . . there is more that could have been brought to the attention of the writer—especially one who seems to be a beginner at academic writing.

In addition to providing an expanded example of feedback to the review mentee, this incident shows the kind of inferences reviewers make with respect to authors, despite reviews being blind, with the mentor concluding that the author "seems to be a beginner at academic writing" and using this supposition as a justification for giving the author clearer comments regarding how to revise the paper. The issue of reviewers constructing the identities of the authors they review is explored in more depth by Tardy and Matsuda (2009).

Discussion

One lens through which to view the exchanges between review mentors and mentees is that of relational management (Madlock & Booth-Butterfield, 2012), where openness and advice giving are particularly relevant to our discussion. Regarding openness, or "directly discussing the nature of the relationship" (Madlock & Booth-Butterfield, 2012, p. 26), there was direct discussion of the nature of the reviewer's relationship to authors and how to approach that relationship in critical incident two, and indirect discussion in critical incident one. Regarding advice giving, there was evidence of pushing review mentees toward more sensitive reviewing (critical incident one) and also toward more direct comments to authors (critical incident three). As we suggested above, reviewers, mentors, and mentees drew parallels between reviewing and their own experience of formal evaluation on graduate programs (critical incident two), a finding that resonates with Lovejoy et al. (2011). As editors aware of the access issues many authors face, we feel that to the extent mentors push their mentees toward more sensitivity in language and away from "pit-bull" (Walbot, 2009) reviewing, the reviewer development programs we offer are successful. We also feel there is a need to balance unambiguous commentary regarding what needs to be changed in a paper with comments sensitive toward the author. We feel our reviewers should be clear regarding how papers need to be changed for publication, but should couch their description of those changes in language that is noncon-

frontational and takes the feelings and perspective of the author into account. Critical incident three in particular demonstrates how this was successfully accomplished in one case.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

This study investigated mentor–mentee discourse in reviewing at the AEJ and the JALTCP, revealing how mentee reviewers can be influenced by mentors' and mentees' prior experiences of being evaluated. Those experiences may act to sensitize feedback discourse or make it more direct and expansive. The correspondence collected for this research is useful for us in that it traces the exchange of mentor–mentee beliefs and transformations in discourse use, such as the mentee from critical incident two, who shared with her mentor after the exchange the following, "I understand though what you mean about saying it is unpublishable without saying that directly. I will do my best." This demonstrates increased awareness of the need to mediate criticality in review language and an acceptance of this as part of her responsibilities as a reviewer. To inform us at a deeper level about the implications of this for our respective development programs, this investigation is naturally ongoing.

Some implications for those instigating reviewer development programs are firstly to ask to what extent organizers (Senior Editors) attempt to set an agenda in correct reviewer feedback language. Our personal stance is that this would not be beneficial as diversity of feedback style and reviewer autonomy is preferable to strict monitoring and standardization of feedback language. However, as Senior Editors overviewing our development programs and therefore privy to regular correspondence between mentors and mentees, we are conscious of when we should, or must, intervene in the mentoring relationship when extreme views or judgements are made. This is illustrated in one incident where a mentor makes suggestions not to make specific tracked changes in files; advice which goes against at least one author's expressed desires (Muller, 2012). In brief, our earlier study into reviewer perceptions of what is acceptable academic research and academic writing style and where our journals should be positioned in the field (Adamson & Muller, 2011) would seem to reflect the diversity of findings gathered so far in this present research.

Our future research directions, apart from a continuation of the analysis of more mentor–mentee correspondence, point to a comparison of discourse styles of the feedback given by active reviewers of the same submission once they have completed their development programs. This would show the long-term influence of the mentor–mentee relationship. Further to this, one current initiative at AEJ involves new reviewers reflecting on how they review past submissions to the journal compared to previous reviews of the paper. This gives longitudinal insights into reviewer attitudes before they start reviewing and in the in-service reviewing stage.

Bio Data

Theron Muller, University of Toyama, is a teacher and researcher based in Japan. He is lead editor of *Innovating EFL Teaching in Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, and teaches the online MASH Academic Publishing course. He is interested in academic publishing research and TEFL/TESL classroom-based research.

John Adamson is an Associate Professor at the University of Niigata Prefecture in Japan. He is Senior Associate Editor of *Asian EFL Journal* and Chief Editor of *The Linguistics Journal*. He received his EdD from Leicester University in the UK and is currently interested in interdisciplinarity and developing journal editorial systems.

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