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Writing for Publication in *The Language Teacher*: The Why and How of the Peer Review Process

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JALT offers members opportunities to publish articles on language teaching in Japan and gain insights from reading those articles, which are distributed through our member publications, *The Language Teacher* (*TLT*) and *JALT Journal*. However, teachers relatively new to writing for publication may find shepherding their manuscripts through to successful publication in one of JALT's flagship publications intimidating. In this invited *TLT* Feature Article, we overview *TLT*'s peer review process, including the roles of staff who interact with authors and the timelines for review and publication, as well as common issues that authors face in seeking to publish peer-reviewed content. Through this article we hope to clarify the peer review process and, thus, better prepare prospective authors to submit their own content to one of *TLT*'s two peer-reviewed columns.

JALTは、会員の皆様に日本の言語教育に関する論文を発表する機会を提供し、また発表された論文を読むことで見識を深めていただくことを目的として、会員向け出版物『The Language Teacher』（TLT）や『JALT Journal』を発行しています。しかし、執筆経験の浅い先生方にとっては、JALTの主要な出版物への原稿掲載を成功に導くのは難しいと感じられるかもしれません。このTLTの特集記事では、著者とやり取りするスタッフの役割、査読と出版のスケジュール、査読付き論文の出版を目指す著者が直面しがちな問題など、TLTの査読のプロセスを概観します。この記事を通じて査読プロセスを明確にすることで、TLTの2つの査読付きコラムのいずれかに自身の論考を投稿しようと考える著者の皆様の準備を手助けしたいと思います。

Before discussing peer reviewed publishing in *The Language Teacher* (*TLT*), it is worth addressing why you might consider publishing a peer-reviewed manuscript at all. As the following discussion illustrates, the peer review process is potentially long, stretching over several months at a minimum, and potentially fraught with several layers of publication "brokers" (Lillis & Curry, 2006, p. 4), including editors and reviewers, critically evaluating and requesting changes to your writing. As writing is constitutive of identity (Ivanič, 1997), receiving critical critiques of your writing, even constructive ones, can often feel like a negative evaluation of you as a person, leaving some prospective authors to ask why pursue publication at all.

In an examination of the writing-for-publication experiences of 23 Japan-based language teacher authors (Muller, 2018), Theron found that authors sought to publish academically for two primary reasons. The first was career oriented: They felt that being able to demonstrate a publication record would assist them in applying for jobs. Many of those authors were in limited-term contract positions, such as "fixed-term appointments [...] for up to 5 years" (Khaitova & Muller, 2022a, p. 121), and because they knew they would need to apply for jobs soon, they felt it necessary to demonstrate publication experience on their job applications (Muller, 2018). In later research into the texts of job advertisements, Khaitova and Muller (2022b) confirmed these authors' perceptions, finding that 88% of job advertisements for tenured positions in Japan explicitly mentioned publications as an application requirement. Less commonly, positions may explicitly specify minimum numbers of publications, such as "8 or more academic articles or books (at least two of which are refereed)" for associate professor applicants and "3 or more academic articles or books (at least 1 of which is refereed)" for lecturer applicants (Muller, 2018, p. 146).

The second reason why authors wrote for publication was to share teaching ideas with their peers in the hopes of helping other teachers to further improve their classroom practice. One author, Kathy (a pseudonym), put it this way:

> Describing what I was doing in the classroom seemed to be the most useful in terms of giving other teachers ideas to use in the classroom. That's ultimately all I ever wanted from research—ideas to make teaching easier and more fun for everyone involved. (Muller, 2018, p. 167)

This sentiment was likewise reflected by Talandis (2010), who investigated Japanese faculty writing for English publication.

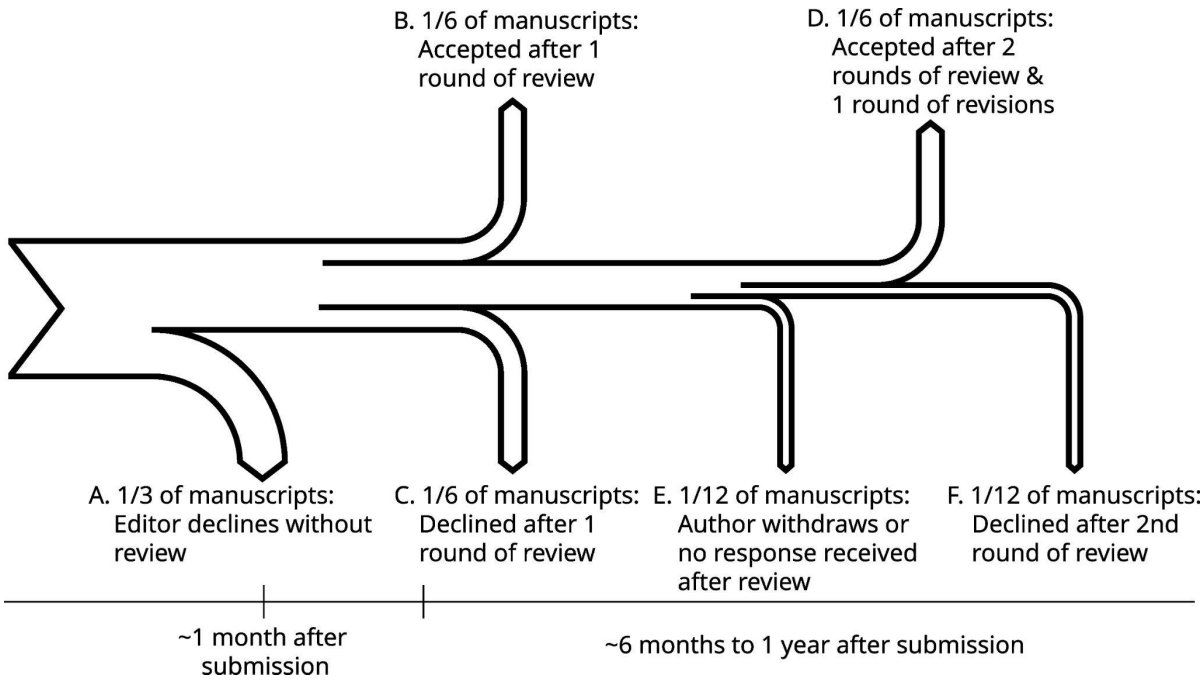
Having addressed why to write for academic publication more generally, at least for teacher-authors interested in careers in higher education, next we turn to the question of why to write for peer-reviewed publication in *TLT*. Addressing potential authors' careerist motivations, answering this question requires first outlining different publication types and their hierarchical relationship in faculty evaluation. Many universities have an in-house journal (*kiyo* in Japanese) that (generally full-time) faculty have the right to submit manuscripts to. Kiyo may or may not be peer reviewed, depending on article type. In Muller (2018), authors described kiyo publication as a safe option that had a clear timeline to publication and required no or few changes to manuscripts between initial submission and publication. However, in university evaluation systems, kiyo articles are typically given the lowest evaluation. For example, one Japanese national university's evaluations for faculty promotions gave 1 point for school-level journal (kiyo) publications, 2 for municipal-level publications, 4 for prefectural-level publications, 6 for regional-level publications, 8 for national-level publications, and 10 for international-level publications (Muller, 2018, p. 145). It is important to note that such numerical evaluation systems can be misleading; a faculty hiring committee is unlikely to consider 10 kiyo publications equivalent to an international publication when comparatively evaluating candidates. Nevertheless, these numbers at least put into perspective the potential desirability of publishing in a national-level publication such as *TLT*, at least with regard to an author's career-oriented motivations.

Another distinction between types of publication that authors signaled as important is peer review (Muller, 2018), referring to the editorial practice of sending manuscripts out to independent readers to evaluate their worthiness for publication. There are several different types of peer review (Benos et al., 2007), or refereeing, and as a social practice it is subject to change (Weller, 2001). TLT practices blind, anonymous peer reviews, whereby reviewers do not know the identities of the authors and vice versa. Generally, authors saw peer-reviewed (refereed) publication as more desirable than non-peer-reviewed (non-refereed) publication (Muller, 2018), a tendency that was backed up by an analysis of university job advertisements (Khaitova & Muller, 2022a).

Turning to authors' interests in sharing their ideas and improving other teachers' praxis, as Talandis (2010) recommends, another reason to publish in *TLT* is that it is distributed to JALT members throughout Japan and that its online version is available indefinitely, to JALT members for six

Figure 1.

TLT *Manuscript Submission Results*



months and then to anyone anywhere with an internet connection thereafter, thus making *TLT* an excellent way to share your thoughts and experiences with a Japan- (and world-) wide audience.

Submitting Manuscripts to *TLT* for Peer Review

Having answered the question of why write peer-reviewed content for *TLT*, here we switch to discussing how to submit work for review. The specific guidelines for *TLT*'s peer reviewed content are on its Submission Guidelines website (https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/submissions). The English peer-reviewed columns are Feature Articles and Readers' Forum. The *TLT* submission guidelines include recommendations for length, referencing, and formatting that we encourage you to follow.

Once an English-language manuscript for peer review is ready for submission, it needs to be uploaded through the online submission portal (① in the Appendix), available from *TLT*'s Submission Guidelines page. To submit a manuscript, you need to first create an account. Once you have submitted your manuscript, the editors are notified and your manuscript begins the screening process (at the left side of Figure 1). If you want to submit content to one of *TLT*'s non-refereed columns (i.e., those that appear after te Feature Articles and Readers' Forums), you should contact the respective column editor. Japanese Feature Articles and Readers' Forum manuscripts are submitted to the Japanese Editors directly via email. Staff email addresses are listed at the front of every issue.

Editorial Screening

The first step that peer-reviewed submissions undergo is editorial screening, which can take up to a month (② in the Appendix). At this stage the *TLT* editors examine the submitted manuscript and make a judgment as to whether it should proceed to peer review. As about one third of manuscripts are declined at this stage (A in Figure 1), it is worth discussing why an editor may decline a manuscript without sending it out for peer review.

Issues with Manuscripts at Editorial Screening

In our experience as *TLT* editors, manuscripts were declined at the editorial screening stage for several reasons. In many cases, they did not fit *TLT*'s guidelines: They were too long, too short, written in a colloquial rather than academic style, or they did not clearly concern language teaching in Japan. Others were likely graduate school assignments that a well-meaning instructor may have encouraged a student to submit for publication. However, while a graduate school assignment may be a good start for a published manuscript—we have both published our own graduate school assignments—such manuscripts likely require considerable work before being ready for publication.

One of the biggest issues with manuscripts rejected at this stage is a failure to clearly engage with an audience. In his research, Theron talked with a handful of authors who said that when they wrote for academic publication, they never had a reader in mind (Muller, 2018). These authors also tended to have the most difficulty getting their work published in peer-reviewed journals. One of these authors submitted the same manuscript to six different journals only to have it rejected without review each time. The essential mindset of envisioning a specific audience develops with time and experience. If you find yourself having trouble imagining who you are writing for, you may benefit from asking a more experienced colleague to write with you.

Another issue with manuscripts at this stage is that the benefits of reading the article are not clearly explained early on. While the importance of your message may be clear to you, your readers are not omniscient: All they can access are the words on the page. Thus, for them to clearly grasp your point, you need to make it explicit. Further, if you want them to read until the end, you need to explain early on how it is going to benefit them, such as by addressing an unanswered question or offering a new perspective on an important issue.

To return to the topic of graduate papers, one issue with even high-scoring graduate papers is that the audience is already implicitly understood to be only one person: your instructor. Further, graduate instructors are looking for students to demonstrate their ability to apply what they have learned in their graduate courses, including a wide range of knowledge. Instructors are also generally interested in student engagement with the material in interesting or novel ways. However, authors writing for peer-reviewed publication are generally expected to write for an audience of more than one, demonstrate only the knowledge necessary to develop the argument in that manuscript, and fully develop their ideas. Hence, even a high-scoring graduate paper likely requires considerable work before being ready for peer review.

Finally, another concern editors have when screening submissions is whether they feel they are likely to successfully pass through peer review. Reviewers (and editors) devote considerable time and expertise to deciding what content a journal should

publish and suggesting how that content should be improved prior to publication. In *TLT*'s case, all this work is done on a voluntary basis. As such, reviewers can become frustrated if asked to review multiple manuscripts in a row that they feel are unlikely to be published. As reviewers are a limited resource, the editors have an interest in screening manuscripts so that those sent on to peer review are those that they feel are likely to succeed.

Whether a *TLT* editor decides to send a manuscript for peer review or declines it at this stage, the author should receive an email notification from the online submission system when that decision is made. Typically, the editors also explain why the manuscript is being declined if they choose to decline it without peer review.

Peer Review

In peer review, the manuscript is sent to two reviewers, each of whom is asked to evaluate its publishability in *TLT* and to suggest how it should be improved prior to publication (③ in the Appendix). Ideally, this step of the process takes only two months but, in some cases, can take up to four.

Once the reviews are complete, the editors consolidate the reviewers' comments and recommendations to decide how to proceed (④ in the Appendix). Practically speaking, reviewers can make one of three recommendations: *accept with revisions*, *require major revisions and resubmission*, or *decline*. While accepting a manuscript without revisions is technically possible, it is extremely rare; in our collective experience, we have only ever seen such a recommendation after a single round of review twice.

About one third of submissions are accepted with revisions (B in Figure 1). These manuscripts then go on to the next stage of the process. Of the remaining two thirds, about half are recommended for major revisions, which means that they will require another round of review following resubmission. The other half are declined (C in Figure 1).

Of those manuscripts recommended resubmission, about half are ultimately accepted for publication and go on to the next stage of the process (D in Figure 1), about a quarter of them are eventually rejected (F in Figure 1), and the final quarter are eventually withdrawn by the authors, or the editors do not hear back on them (E in Figure 1).

Issues with Manuscripts at Peer Review

Given that about half of manuscripts coming back from peer review are recommended for resubmission, it is important for an author to consider this recommendation as a positive sign and to go through the reviewers' comments and recommendations to revise the submission. While authors may have a variety of reasons for foregoing revision and withdrawing their manuscripts at this stage, the journal editors will try to avoid this outcome if possible, as they have already invested considerable time into their own screening as well as that of the reviewers in their evaluations. Further, research has shown that authors who persist by revising and resubmitting their work are ultimately published (Belcher, 2007). As *TLT* allows a maximum of two rounds of review, we would encourage authors who have the option of a second round to pursue it.

Reviewers can comment on any aspect of a manuscript, but they generally assess the soundness of the research, the cohesiveness of the text, the clarity of the research questions addressed, and the degree to which the literature review appears to cover the current state of the field. Common issues in manuscripts at this stage include problems with coherence between the different parts of a manuscript, conflating research questions and questions used in research instruments (such as questionnaires), and overly broad statements about the current state of the field (e.g., "This has never been investigated before"). One problem that cannot be resolved is that of how the research was conducted. If an issue with the study methods is identified, it usually leads to declining the manuscript. This does not mean that the research is without merit, but it does mean that the reviewers feel the investigation needs to be redone addressing the issues identified, before it can be considered for publication. Generally, other issues can be addressed by revising the manuscript based on the reviewers' and editors' comments and advice.

Post-Acceptance Editing

If you are relatively new to writing for publication, you may be surprised to learn that after your manuscript is accepted for publication, the process is not yet finished. In Theron's research, authors' manuscripts were revised the most following peer review, but a substantial number of other important changes came after manuscript acceptance (Muller, 2018); publishing in *TLT* is no exception in this regard. Basically, until a manuscript has successfully passed through peer review, the editors are reluctant to invest their limited time into it. Only after a manuscript has been accepted will the editors begin meticulously shaping it up further for publication (⑤ in the Appendix). It is also typically at this point that a manuscript is tentatively scheduled

for formal production (i.e., copyediting, layout, and proofreading), with the anticipated publication date dependent on how quickly authors can satisfactorily complete their revisions. The revision process can take several months of back-and-forths, depending on how much work an individual manuscript requires, before it goes into the *TLT* production process.

Post-Acceptance Editing Issues

Problems occasionally arise after acceptance because authors mistake their part in the manuscript shaping process as being complete and expect their manuscript to be published soon with minimal further revisions. However, in most cases reviewers do not assess whether manuscripts are error free and ready for publication. Rather, they simply judge whether the ideas and the research presented should be published. In most cases, even highly positively reviewed manuscripts benefit from additional "polishing of language" (Gosden, 1995, p. 43). If you are lucky enough to find your manuscript at this stage of the production process, please know that the editors (and other *TLT* staff who shape your manuscript), as volunteers with the best interests of the *TLT* readership in mind, are working to make your manuscript as easy to read and understand as possible.

Production

Once the editors are finished working with an author on a manuscript, it goes into production (⑥ in the Appendix), which involves copyediting your word processing file, layout into *TLT* format as a PDF, and then proofreading the PDF. For additional quality control, *TLT* also has a final, final proofreading stage. Copyediting generally takes place over the course of about a month, with the copyeditor reading manuscripts for overall cohesiveness and adherence to APA style. Copyeditors' comments are generally filtered through the editors and may resemble some of the changes editors request following a manuscript's acceptance. Proofreaders are generally more concerned with identifying mechanical errors rather than awkward language or phrasing, as making changes to a manuscript after it has been laid out for publication is considerably more painstaking and time consuming. This process may also take about a month, with the editors acting as a relay between the proofreaders and authors. Finally, final, final proofreading is usually completed about a week before an issue is sent to the printer. Authors generally cannot review changes at this stage, as they mostly consist of uncontestable errors, such as misspellings or formatting problems. *TLT* is sent to the printer on the 12th of the month before it arrives in your mailbox, so this issue was likely sent to the printer on February 12th for March/April publication.

Issues with Manuscripts in Production

Sometimes manuscript issues arise during production, mainly due to time constraints. Because *TLT* must adhere to clear deadlines, when authors are slow to respond or are unavailable, the editors sometimes find themselves needing to push manuscripts through the production process without clear author guidance. While JALT Publications does retain the right to make changes without consulting authors, the preference is to ensure that authors are happy with their manuscript before its publication. Issues also arise when authors challenge changes suggested by the editors, copyeditors, and proofreaders. While we want authors to be happy with their published product, it is important to view copyeditors and proofreaders as first initial readers. Thus, their confusion or uncertainty about an author's chosen wording can be seen as a reliable sign that it can likely be improved.

Advice for Authors Wanting to Publish in *TLT*

So far, we have focused on the *TLT* production process, including timelines and typical outcomes for submissions. We finish with some advice for authors seeking publication in *TLT* that we hope is generalizable to other publications as well.

Collaborate With an Experienced Colleague

First, do not write alone. If you can, try to find someone you respect professionally to work with you, especially on your first manuscripts for peer-reviewed publication. While coauthoring is not a universal solution to the difficulties of writing for publication, having someone to hold you accountable helps to set clear deadlines and gives you another perspective on your writing, helping ensure that you successfully communicate your intended message to your readers. Similarly, before you submit a manuscript or after it has received a desk rejection but before you submit it elsewhere, solicit independent feedback from an experienced colleague or through a service like JALT's (free) Peer Support Group (PSG; https://jalt-publications.org/psg). Especially since *TLT* only allows a maximum of two rounds of review for each submission, soliciting feedback from an independent party like the PSG before you initially submit your manuscript can

mean the difference between a recommendation of minor revisions and the rejection of a revised manuscript in the second round of review. This is because extra feedback from the PSG prior to review can help authors address issues that reviewers will almost certainly pick up on. Thus, not getting peer feedback prior to manuscript submission could lead to manuscripts being evaluated more critically at review. Further, authors who asked for outside help, both prior to and following peer review, tended to publish more (Muller, 2018). Asking for help can also include asking the editors to clarify reviewers' comments, editorial change requests, or changes requested during production. Our advice is to be courteous and conscious of not taking too much of their time. It is often easier for an editor to clarify something that you are unsure of than to have to re-revise a manuscript that was changed inappropriately because some feedback was unclear or poorly understood.

Cite the Journal You Aim to Publish In

Second, when trying to publish in *TLT*, you should read and cite it. This helps demonstrate how the conversation you are engaging with is relevant to the *TLT* readership. For example, McCrostie (2010) also discusses the importance of publishing for securing a tenured university position in Japan, and so helps to demonstrate how the theme of writing for publication as presented here is potentially relevant to *TLT*'s readership. In addition to connecting your work to previously published articles, you should also explain how it expands on this earlier work in important ways to make clear to your readers how your own work contributes to the ongoing conversation.

Incorporate the Review-and-Revision Process into Your Writing Workflow

Finally, you should view writing as a process, not a finished product. In an analysis of six manuscripts, all of them underwent changes throughout the publication process, with changes made in every section and some sections changed more than others (Muller, 2018). In other words, you should expect what you submit for review be changed in the review process. While peer review represents a kind of quality metric for journal publication, it is certainly not free of problems (Jefferson, 2002), although hopefully your opinion will be that your writing is improved through peer review and revision. Nevertheless, peer review and revision should be seen as a natural part of the writing process rather than an unwelcome additional burden. Expecting your manuscript to be changed helps to plan for that (even without knowing exactly what will be changed) and, thus, makes the process go more smoothly.

Conclusion

We hope we have demystified some of the processes underlying peer-reviewed publication in *TLT*. We began by explaining some of the reasons for writing for peer-reviewed publication, particularly in *TLT*. We discussed *TLT*'s process of editorial screening, peer review, and production with attention to some of the potential issues that can arise at each stage of the process. Then we finished with some advice for authors to consider when writing their next peer reviewed manuscript. We hope that by arming you with this knowledge, this article helps to make your next peer-reviewed submission go more smoothly and ultimately lead to successful publication!

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Appendix

Overview of TLT Feature Article and Readers' Forum Screening and Review Process