

Editorial Reflections on Open Review: Leveling the Playing Field?

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Abstract

In this study we investigated review interaction between supervising editors, reviewers and authors engaged in Open Review at the journal *English Scholarship beyond Borders* in the field of applied linguistics and TESOL. Analyzing our interactional review discourse, survey data and literature from studies in other fields into Open Review, we concluded that the initial principles of 'leveling the playing field' though unblinded reviewing among participants met with some approval, but that important lessons were to be learned about relative positioning in the field and recognition of advances in journal OR practices from other disciplines.

Introduction: Seeking a Level Playing Field

In this study, we investigate review feedback and response between supervising editors, reviewers and authors in non-blind Open Peer Review (hereafter OR) at a new online journal - *English Scholarship beyond Borders (ESBB)* - in the field of applied linguistics and TESOL. Established in 2015 at *ESBB* to make our OR process more transparent and accountable for authors and editors, we wish to assess its effectiveness in achieving these objectives. *ESBB* has a policy of primarily revealing author, supervising editor and reviewer identities in the pre-publication review stage and often operates by posting submissions on Google Drive where participants give feedback and responses in-text or comment function. Published articles do not show reviewer and editor identities or the feedback given as in some interpretations of OR practice (Ross-Hellauer & Görögh, 2019).

The principles shaping our adoption of OR are based in Gao and Wen's (2009, p. 702) "co-responsibility" in academic publishing, where reviewers assume a brokering role alongside authors (Lillis, 2013), rather than gate-keepers of academic standards. As co-founders of the journal we are sensitive to the experiences of early career researchers in their first steps into academic publishing as compared to our field's prevalent model of double-blind peer review (DBPR). In DBPR, there are well-reported criticisms of anonymous, or blinded, reviewing which entails harsh "pitbull" (Walbot, 2009, p. 24), rather than constructive feedback (Martin, 2008). Six years into the journal's operation, we also need to reflect upon OR's relative merits and demerits, as Khan (2010) and Hyland (2015) warn that reviewer-author relations may actually increase bias.

In consideration of these issues, our research looks at selected discourse from the OR process and a survey eliciting the views of editors, reviewers and authors reflecting upon OR from 2015 to 2021. In particular, findings are compared with those from the formative years of the journal (Adamson & Nunn, 2017). This combination of discourse and survey data seeks to inform

our editorial practices and provide resonance for other journals investigating OR. The extension of these objectives is to enhance authorial agency through a more equitable model of reviewing and, as in early conversations about our founding principles, 'level the playing field' for those publishing with us.

Reviewing Studies into Open Review Practices

Our own studies into the OR practices at *ESBB* looked at how journal editors, reviewers and authors engaged in OR, some for the first time, in the formative years after the establishment of *ESBB* in 2015 (Adamson & Nunn, 2017). We returned to the theme partially in a wider study on how journals - both DBPR and OR - we were affiliated with were positioned in our field (Adamson et al., 2021). Our first observation was the paucity of OR-related studies in applied linguistics and TESOL so reading across into other disciplines was essential.

Initial findings in Adamson and Nunn (2017) revealed the dialogic nature of OR through a discourse analysis of feedback and interaction between participants and that non-blind reviewing was to some extent successful in encouraging some authors to negotiate reviewer feedback more freely than under DBPR. Questionnaire and collaborative autoethnographic findings from participants showed divergent views on OR, some of enthusiasm with the transparent nature of exchanges between reviewers and authors, and others of discomfort among authors and reviewers due to the revelation of identities, showing the effect of relative status in the field. Procedural issues were also noted concerning the apparently random 'social media' nature of feedback over time if review was on Google Drive, in contrast to the more staged and close editorial mediation associated with DBPR's submission - revision - resubmission procedure. However, later findings in Adamson et al. (2021) noted the mentoring-like possibilities in OR if a sympathetic stance was adopted towards early career multilingual authors. Also, of wider significance was the perception among the editors that OR held the potential to mitigate inevitable bias in reviewing through its heightened sense of accountability when negative feedback was given.

Literature surrounding OR from other fields revealed in-depth investigations with defined evaluation criteria, such as Tennant (2018) in microbiology journals where seven key aspects assessed the 'openness' of OR journals in that field: "open identities, open reports, open participation, open interaction, open pre-review manuscripts, open final-version commenting and open platforms" (pp. 3-4). Various hybrid models of OR existed with opt-in choices for authors (Ford, 2016), indicating the importance of negotiation with participants. Among these models, Tennant noted the publication of pre-acceptance manuscripts alongside review feedback, editorial mediation and revised drafts with the final accepted version, and even reader comments (*Nature Newsletter*, 1999) or "crowdsourced" feedback (Ford, 2015). However, early experiments in OR at the *British Medical Journal* in 1999 pointed to procedural and ethical issues, also seen in Ford's (2015) investigation into STEM journals where reviewers had the choice to disclose their identities, devaluing the non-blind aspect of OR. The identification of reviewers received resistance, particularly in nursing journals (Baggs et al., 2008) where reviewers preferred anonymity "to avoid interpersonal conflict and political issues." Most prominent criticism of OR

was the tendency for reviewers of perceived lower status to authors to produce "bland, even timid reviews" which failed to challenge authors on content, resulting in review "nepotism" (*Nature Newsletter*, 1999), an issue also reported by van Rooyen et al. (1999). Other problems included ethnic bias among US reviewers towards non-US reviewers (Link, 1998). When journals adopt OR, Fitzpatrick and Santo (2012) and Stevenson (2013) reported on the failed move over to a hybrid version of OR at the well-established *Nature* in 2006, but greater acceptance at new journals.

These negative experiences stand in contrast to the more positive reports of enhanced "rigor" (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012, p. 4) in OR when participants engaged collaboratively in critical dialogue without the fear of reprisals due to status in their disciplinary hierarchy. Further merits to OR outlined by Ford (2016) pointed to the "developmental writing environment for authors" and the heightened sense of community between participants as a result of the more speedy and less formal submit-review procedure. Fitzpatrick and Santo (2012) also saw healthy dialogue in OR as a means to strengthen disciplinary communities of practice. As one criticism of DBPR's policy of reviewer anonymity was the invisibility and lack of recognition of academic labor, Ford (2015) and Fitzpatrick and Santo acclaimed the OR's un-blinding of reviewer and editorial identities as acknowledging such work.

Perhaps key to this assessment of OR implementation was what discipline-influenced evaluation criteria are in operation:

... peer review in the sciences, which ostensibly serves as a means of verification of results or validation of methodologies, peer review in the humanities often focuses on originality, creativity, depth and cogency of argument, and the ability to develop and communicate new connections across and additions to existing texts and ideas. (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012, p. 7)

This suggests that OR as implemented in applied linguistics journals uses review criteria which involve a wider acceptance of the inevitability of so-called 'subjectivity' than in the sciences.

Fitzpatrick & Santo (2012, p. 16) also recommend the avoidance of "groupthink" among reviewers, editors and authors; instead, they advocate a healthy challenging of views on manuscripts, as well as review procedure to aid OR's development. This points to a "structured flexibility" (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012, p. 4) where all participants shape the model of OR, one which best fits the journal stakeholders' needs and competences (Ford, 2016). To achieve this, Tennant (2018) noted newer journals without a prior history of DBPR are better placed to achieve consensus in OR practice than journals transitioning into OR from DBPR. For journals making the common transition from DBPR to OR, Moylan et al.'s (2014) study into the merged science journals recommended critical reflection into the effect of OR on younger reviewers reluctant to move away from anonymity. In this sense, our objective of a level playing field must consider the relative positioning of authors, reviewers and editors.

Our Current Study

To evaluate participant views of our OR process in the post-formative stage, i.e. at a stage in which review practices have become familiar or have been challenged, we decided to revisit

some selected extracts of OR interaction and couple them with responses from a survey distributed to authors, reviewers and editors (n=12) active with us during the 2015-2021 period. Extracts were chosen as examples of key interactions which we felt shaped our views about OR, termed as "critical incidents" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 480) in the review process. In addition, an eight-question survey (see appendix) was distributed to participants consisting of past authors, past and present reviewers and supervising editors. Responses were analyzed according to the thematic commonalities and differences and respondents were asked to identify from which viewpoint (reviewer, author or supervising editor) they chose to answer.

Findings and Discussion

We turn firstly to some key findings from the OR interaction and have chosen extracts we feel represented key, or critical incidents, typifying what commonly has occurred in ESBB review practice.

Findings from OR interaction

One first typical feedback from reviewers occurred in the comment function appearing to the side of the manuscript on Google Drive, as can be seen in extract 1 below. As the reviewer was known to the authors, we were aware of their particular stance towards academic publishing as a multilingual scholar educated in both the center and the periphery, a point resonating with Tennant's (2018) "open identities". The highlighted comment requesting 'clarification' of the term 'periphery' for 'our agonized/less experienced colleagues in the expanding circle' was beneficial for the improvement of the paper by means of not only revealing the reviewer's own geopolitical positioning, but also asking us to address more directly a non-center audience. This way of interacting with authors points to the advantages outlined by Ford's (2016) dialogism in OR and, perhaps more importantly in this case, to revising a paper with ethnic sensitivities in mind (Link, 2018).

Extract 1: Reviewer to author feedback

and how such journals handle submissions (Lillis, 2013). We build on an important but somewhat sidelined tradition of literature concerned with writing for publication in "peripheral" (Salager-Meyer, 2014, p. 79) journals (**A brief clarification of what constitutes "peripheral" will be helpful given that this paper is meant to enlighten and enrich the understanding of our agonized /less experienced colleagues in the expanding circle given their inevitable need to both navigate and negotiate the politics and pressures that arise from this "center-peripheral" dichotomy?**). Specifically, we wish to explore how issues pervading the field, such as pressure for multilingual scholars to publish, influence our experiences as editors.

In extract 2 below, we considered cases where authors declined to follow reviewer suggestions. Extract 2 is taken from a document sent by authors to the supervising editor outlining their amendments to the reviewers' feedback. Although not uncommon in DBPR, we saw rejection of reviewer comments as a common occurrence in our OR practices and strengthened authorial agency. This depended on trust between participants in a community of practice where, as Fitzpatrick and Santo (2012) noted, final publication after negotiation is a shared responsibility best achieved by mutual respect.

Extract 2: Author response to review feedback

Introduction

There are some very good reasons for placing a description of the editors in the Introduction (Table 1). You might also consider placing it in the Methods section to help with the flow of the Introduction.

We understand this idea but would rather place it within the Introduction to give the readers an early contextualization of who we are.

In extract 3, we noted frequent reviewer to reviewer dialogue, an aspect less experienced in DBPR where reviewers send feedback to the supervising editor without engagement between themselves. Ford's (2016) dialogism in reviewing is exhibited again here showing the "structured flexibility" (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012, p. 4) between reviewers, meaning that, in an unprompted way, their use of the platform (Google Drive) shaped their own interpretation of OR practice.

Extract 3: Reviewer to reviewer discussion of feedback

Very good stuff here, but I am also thinking of metacognition, which seems more mechanical perhaps, more purposeful?? Then my head begins to whirl with questions of perception, activity, intention, signs, signs everywhere (my own obsession)....but that is just me; different perspective here. I'm hoping at this point, by the end of the manuscript I will be able to articulate the difference between metacognition and reflection based in phenomenology

[Show less](#)



John Adamson
Jun 15, 2015



I'd agree with this idea of metacognition. It didn't occur to me on first reading but given the overall purpose involved, could the reflective approach be seen as metacognitive in nature?

This dialogism was also seen in many instances of reviewer - author interaction in the comment functions on Google Drive. In extract 4 below, the reviewer's comment about their own

students triggered an exchange with the author, Roger Nunn, leading to a key addition to the final manuscript. This more casual, conversational-like feedback arguably resulted in a more negotiated amendment.

Extract 4: Reviewer - author dialogue

This is so much more profound than metacognition. I think at the end, when I am thinking of the students who were more instrumental in completing this activity and in their writing,
[Show more](#)



Roger Nunn
Jul 16, 2015

I think the emphasis on the inevitability of subjectivity as a starting point might be the major difference. Metacognition does - I assume - involve examining our own thought processes.

Extracts 5, 6 and 7 below illustrated a critical incident which indicates that OR can be far from "bland" (*Nature Newsletter*, 1999) In this case, vigorous debate about very detailed and critical feedback to authors eventually required editorial mediation. He felt the authors had responded fully to the review but with strongly argued counter-arguments criticizing the reviewer in extract 5. Unhappy with this response, the reviewer asked to withdraw as a reviewer in extract 6, necessitating mediation to pacify the reviewer and authors in extract 7. This incident resonated with the previous findings in Adamson and Nunn (2017) and Baggs et al. (2008) concerning anonymity and pointed to the subjectivity inherent in the humanities (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012). However, as seen in the editor's comments in extract 7, the act of countering feedback is a legitimate part of OR which challenges claims that it lacks the rigor of DBPR (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012).

Extract 5: Authors' response to one review

However, we are concerned by the fact that most of the comments seem to be deviating from the borders crossing as you seem to prescribe a style of writing different from that of the authors. You mentioned too many theories without giving a gist to guide us.

Extract 6: Reviewer's response to authors and the supervising editor

My suggestions were "suggestions" and were by no means cast in stone propositions. ... may I kindly ask you to please consider relieving me from reviewing this paper. As I said, my take on the submitted article was just an honest one.

Extract 7: Supervising editor's mediation

I think the authors have responded quite fully so I have no issues with the process. I don't see a need to say [the reviewer] dropped out of the process. He did a detailed job so he has done his part and he expressed his views. Academics don't need to agree.

Findings from the survey

Key survey responses are summarized and discussed in relation to the literature below. Firstly, authors' experiences of OR were generally positive with descriptions such as 'empowering', 'decolonizing', 'stress free' and that they felt trust towards the reviewers often known to them. Some insightful comments from early career scholars chiming with the developmental benefits outlined by Ford (2016) were that OR 'affords you a voice as an author' to negotiate amendments with reviewers 'rather than being crucified in the closet by intellectual shadows.' This was echoed by another author who likened the interaction with reviewers to 'that of colleagues, not unknown gods' and pointed to the convenience of 'work[ing] directly with reviewers instead of through an editor as a middle-man.' The overall process allowed one author more of 'an opportunity to reflect and improve', which alluded to the developmental possibilities of OR (Ford, 2016).

Those commenting from the standpoint of reviewers and supervising editors also noted the positive and 'enriching' process for them, as well as for authors. One reviewer expressed how OR allowed them to focus more on helping authors 'co-construct' the manuscript. Other comments pointed to the benefits of the direct nature of author - reviewer interaction on feedback rather than through the time-consuming mediation of a supervising editor, as Ford (2015) noted. Another reviewer likened this interaction to a 'live conversation', interestingly also noted in reviewer-author discourse in extract 4.

In comparing OR with DBPR and their potential biases, all respondents mentioned more familiarity with the latter when submitting or reviewing but many expressed a wish for more journals to adopt the OR model. DBPR was frequently labeled negatively due to 'cold and removed', 'harsh', or vague feedback where 'reviewers often aim to find fault' and impose their stance on content and writing style, rather than collaboratively negotiating amendments with authors as colleagues, a point echoing Walbot (2009) and our own formative findings (Adamson & Nunn, 2017). However, one respondent complained that OR reviewers too were susceptible to imposing their own writing styles on authors. Some complained of the 'ignorance' of reviewers and the lack of transparency associated with blinded review practice. DBPR's submit-revise-resubmit procedure was seen as 'limiting' and slower compared to OR. One experienced respondent bemoaned the lack of mediation between reviewers and authors which rendered the process 'stilted and formalized.' An emerging multilingual scholar noted how 'DBPR can make it difficult for authors to improve their papers, especially new authors'. Furthermore, the blind nature of DBPR was cast into doubt by one respondent as it 'may not always be blind, in particular when working with local journals.' However, as noted by Fitzpatrick and Santo (2012), one reviewer stressed that evaluation in DBPR differs between the humanities and STEM disciplines. Of some concern was

that several respondents noted both DBPR and OR 'native speaker' editors exhibited similar bias towards 'non-native English' scholars.

In contrast, OR was regarded as quicker for publication purposes with key differences to DBPR evident in the naturally unfolding feedback on certain points at a time, rather than the clear rounds of review in DBPR. This typically involved multiple stages of drafts akin to an 'unending fluid draft in the form of a conversation.' As previously mentioned, OR was termed positively as more interactive or 'dialogic' creating the 'rapport' essential to nurture less experienced scholars. One respondent stressed that both reviewers and authors could learn from each other and, if conflicts arose, resolution directly between them, or through editorial mediation, was more likely compared to DBPR. Despite these positive reflections on OR, reference was made to pitfalls where reviewers would 'avoid hurting the feelings of an author' or, if acquainted, 'may hesitate to speak openly', which challenges the preconception of OR's openness (Tennant, 2018). The pressure to conform to the views of other reviewers (Fitzpatrick & Santo, 2012) was raised in that 'where personal interaction is involved in the confirmation of quality, groupthink among reviewers is possible.' Bias in OR was noted among reviewers who naturally favored their own preferred research paradigms, the solution being posited that it can be eliminated if they position themselves as 'facilitators and co-constructors.' Several younger multilingual reviewers felt authors of higher status disparaged feedback by 'nonentities' in the field. The reverse was also noted where bias was shown against 'non-native' authors 'with low academic titles.' An experienced researcher warned that in OR '[a]uthors and reviewers can fall out for life.' One final noteworthy comment was that the unblinded nature of OR led to a tendency to emphasize details in feedback over deeper content issues due to fear of challenging more established scholars.

As suggestions for amending OR policy, Tennant's (2018) models of OR were addressed, by 'making the reviewers' evaluations public in the hopes of de-occluding the review process.' It was also suggested that evaluation guidelines be created for consistency, DOI be set up for each article and that authors be given the chance to propose guest reviewers.

Conclusions: Leveling the Playing Field?

Literature from other fields and this discourse and survey-based study into the OR practices several years after *ESBB's* establishment have informed us as founding editors. The relative positioning of participants and the potential for bias emerged as important among less experienced multilingual scholars in our findings, underpinning the ideal of a 'level playing field' but shaped consciously or unconsciously by participants of differing levels of status and experience. Interestingly, in relation to our view of the need to acknowledge the inevitability of review bias, and the view that OR helps bring these biases out into the open, respondents reported experiencing similar biases in both DBPR and OR, particularly, authorial identities which, even when blinded, can be guessed and influence feedback. Overall, findings showed a sense of enthusiasm towards OR which builds on our initial findings (Adamson & Nunn, 2017). As the journal started with OR rather than shifting from DBPR, as Tennant (2018) suggested, the absence

of a DBPR precedent has worked to our advantage in shaping this approval. Looking forward, in keeping with Moylan et al.'s (2014) advice to continually research OR practice, valuable suggestions for procedural changes were made, for instance, publishing feedback and creating evaluation guidelines. In essence, this extended study into *ESBB*'s OR practices, based on the principle of Gao and Wen's (2009, p. 702) "co-responsibility", necessitates exercising Fitzpatrick and Santo's (2012, p. 4) "structured flexibility" where all participants shape the OR model, whatever their relative status in the field or experience in academic publishing.

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Appendix

1. How would you describe your experiences of our unblinded - Open Review - process of peer review at ESBB?
2. What kind of review system - double blind peer review or Open Review - have you usually experienced as a reviewer or author? How would you compare those experiences?
3. What do you think are the merits of Open Review over double blind peer review?
4. What do you think are the demerits?
5. What possible bias could occur in Open Review?
6. What possible bias could occur in double blind peer review?
7. What incidents during the review process at ESBB have shaped your view of Open Review?
8. ESBB operates with an Open Review policy. What amendments to that policy could you suggest?