

**Exploring the Challenges of Reviewers in the Algerian Journals :
Practical Solutions**

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Abstract:

Many Algerian reviewers face serious problems, challenges, and needs in the reviewing process. The aim of this paper is to discuss Algerian reviewers' experience by identifying their challenges and needs. A questionnaire was administered to 100 Algerian reviewers who belong to 25 Algerian journals (B, C and non-classed) in January 2023. Data were analyzed and the results have confirmed the research hypothesis, namely that Algerian reviewers face serious challenges and have serious needs that hinder their effectiveness as reviewers, which also reflects the fact that the quality of the reviewing process and evaluation might not be satisfactory and should be re-considered. The paper concludes with practical suggestions that call for Algerian journals to provide continuous professional development and training workshops to their members to develop their evaluation skills and competence and boost their efficacy and efficiency as reviewers.

Key words: Algerian, reviewers, challenges, needs, journals, effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Peer reviewing is a process of research evaluation made by scholars in the same field of authorship with expertise in a subject and skills and competence in evaluation. The selection of qualified and relevant peer reviewers, who provide high quality reviews, is of central importance to any journal. In fact, the comments of reviewers can have a great positive effect on the improvement of an author's contribution (Black et al., 1998). They can help them improve their ability to communicate their research findings and even make the work more reachable to more disciplinary audience.

It is also of key importance to understand and work towards the rigour and fairness of the reviews. The tasks of selecting reviewers and ensuring rigour and fairness in evaluation are the responsibility of the journal editors in particular. Peer-reviewing, and hence peer-reviewers, tasks, choices, actions and decisions are important because they have critical direct results in how the work is interpreted and evaluated (Black et al., 1998).

Reviewers are at the center of the process of producing and publishing good quality research that contributes to the success of the journal in terms of attracting more research readers and research writers. To help researchers in publishing quality research, journals make regular calls for peer reviewers to join their peer-reviewing team. The major requirement for most Algerian journals, for instance, is that calls are directed towards associate or full professors.

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There is a strong belief that having such academic ranks makes the teacher-reviewer more prepared for the reviewing process. That is to say, the reviewing process can be adequately, effectively, and hence successfully, performed by these agents, which is a factual truth to a some extent. Having reached a specific academic position or rank means that the reviewer has been through several stages of conducting and publishing continuous research papers.

Despite being an appropriate requirement to select peer reviewers to undertake different tasks of reviewing research, a good deal of Algerian journals, especially in language teaching and applied linguistic fields, seem to not to consider the fact that to become reviewers, the members should possess more than an academic title. There are certain essential factors that can should be seriously taken into account to judge and evaluate the quality of reviewers. They should be, for instance, active researchers in terms of good quality research writing and publication and they should also have received, and receive, continuous professional development and training to become both expert and effective peer reviewers.

The major reason behind placing focus on the reviewing process, and mainly on reviewers, is due to the serious problems, challenges and urgent needs that surface in different Algerian journal contexts. In fact, there exists persisting problems and issues in peer-reviewing that reflect or are related to various challenges faced by Algerian reviewers and which necessitate serious intervention.

The aim of this paper is to discuss Algerian academics' experience as peer reviewers in several Algerian journals. Focus is placed on examining their current situation in terms of challenges as well as needs to become successful expert reviewers who contribute to the success of the different Algerian journals.

The research aims are stated as follows :

- a. To identify and discuss the major challenges that face reviewers in several Algerian journals in the Humanities (Applied Linguistics).
- b. To explore whether, or not, academics received, and still receive, any training, or professional development opportunities, in their career as reviewers.

The questions that guide the research study are as follows :

- a. Do Algerian academics face serious challenges in peer reviewing ?
- b. What are their needs as peer-reviewers who belong to different Algerian journals ?
- c. Have reviewers received, and still receive, any professional development or training in peer-reviewing ?

In light of the research aims and the research questions, we hypothesize that

- Algerian reviewers in the field of humanities (language teaching and applied linguistics) face a variety of problems and issues in the reviewing process.

2. Methods

The study involves a sample of one hundred reviewers from twenty five Algerian journals. fourteen journals belong to class C, two belong to class B and nine belong to non-classified journals. The reviewers and the journals have been selected non-randomly. The reason behind this is two-folds. First, choosing reviewers of different academic ranks, namely assistant professor, associate professor and full professor, is of key importance since it provides insightful details related to reviewers' experience which may also have direct effects on other factors such as the expertise, the quality of reviews, and so on. Second, the fact that we have opted for Algerian journals which belong to class B, class C and non classified journals is also for convenient reasons. The researcher's aim is to examine and analyze the problems, challenges and needs that reviewers from a variety of

Algerian journals face in order to have a clear picture of the situation and to see if there are similarities or differences in order to analyze and discuss them.

In terms of research tools, the present study is based on main research tool, which is the questionnaire. The questions were designed to focus on various aspects that provide insightful details about the reviewer's rank, the experience in reviewing, reviewing requirements and expectations, the challenges, the needs, the professional development or training situation and so on. We believe that this research tool is very relevant and appropriate to the research investigation since our purpose is mainly to identify and analyze the problems, challenges and needs of several reviewers with different academic ranks and who belong to various Algerian journals. In this way, we will be able to gather information and data from, somehow, an adequate number of Algerian reviewers who belong to 25 Algerian academic journal in the humanities, and specifically reviewers in the fields of Applied Linguistics and the Didactics of the English Language.

The questionnaire was sent to reviewers during the month of January in the year 2023. Data were gathered in a period of two months (January-February). They were analyzed adopting a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative). The results are communicated in the form of percentages and tables with critical and reflexive analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

The discussion focuses mainly on the problems, challenges and needs identified. In light of the results and the discussion, recommendations are suggested to provide practical solutions for Algerian reviewers' problems/challenges and needs, and to journals requirements also in order to perform the tasks of reviewing in the most effective manner and successful manner.

The first point that is emphasized is the reasons that encourage Algerian academics to become reviewers. Before talking about the challenges, it is first central to consider the main reasons that encourage academics to become reviewers in the different Algerian journals. The following reasons were identified as the major incentives for academics to become reviewers. They are organized according to their order of importance, starting from the most important reasons to the least important ones as showed in the following table.

Table 1. Reasons for Algerian Academics to Become Reviewers in Journals

Reasons for Academics to Become Reviewers	Number	Percentage
<i>A person's academic career progress or promotion</i>	100	100 %
<i>Getting promoted to a higher rank or position (MCB/MCA/Professor)</i>	100	100 %
<i>Interest in becoming an Editor of a journal one day</i>	50	50 %
<i>Educational purposes for the motivated researchers</i>	30	30 %
<i>Gaining experience in peer-reviewing and evaluation</i>	50	50 %
<i>The idea that "They will review mine if I review theirs."</i>	30	30 %
<i>Awareness of colleagues' work lines, particularly for early career reviewers</i>	20	20 %

After gathering the data and analyzing them qualitatively and quantitatively, we identified a list of serious challenges that face Algerian reviewers in the field of Applied Linguistics and English Language Didactics. These identified challenges are, subsequently, also challenges to journal editors. The following are the typical challenges that face Algerian reviewers who belong to various Algerian journals. The challenges are ordered according to their most common occurrence, moving from the most common to the least common ones.

Table 2. The Challenges for Becoming Reviewers in the Algerian Journals

Challenges	Number	Percentage %
Becoming (and even choosing) Reviewers on the basis of Academic Position	100	100 %
Reviewing as a Complex and Demanding Activity	100	100 %
Reviewers' Work Overload (multi-tasks)	100	100 %
Fatigue due to Workload	100	100 %
Reviewing as a Voluntary Task (Unpaid Work)	100	100 %
Reviewers' Lack of Interest or Incentives	100	100 %
Lack of Reviewers' Recognition	80	80 %
Complete Absence of Training and Professional Development Opportunities	100	100 %

One of the strategies that journal editors follow in the selection of peer-reviewers is to call for the people whom they know or the ones whom they think they can rely on in light of their academic rank or position. This can, in fact, have certain negative effects on the reviewing process and on the journal as a whole in terms of the quality of the reviewing process and the publication. This can also create barriers to the development of the journal and the improvement of its quality.

In fact becoming a reviewer on the basis of **academic rank** is not sufficient. Possessing just a rank with no required skills and competences in reviewing may make the task of reviewing a very challenging one for the member. Not all academics are aware of the requirements and the expectations of being a reviewer and may not work towards developing their knowledge and skills. In effect, not understanding and mastering what is expected from them, in terms of experience, competences and qualifications, makes the reviewing tasks always tiring and challenging activities which reflect serious needs and demands to be practically met.

➤ **Reviewing as a Complex and Demanding Activity**

An essential well recognized fact about reviewing is that it is a very complex and demanding activity. Reviewers are always required to perform tasks and ensure the quality of papers. According to the Council of Science Editors, their job goes beyond providing a fair judgement as experts. The responsibilities of reviewers involve the following, inter alia.

- Evaluating of the research paper's in terms of accuracy, novelty, composition and the relevance of research, as well as the consideration of the writing with regard to clarity and being concise.
- Providing timely written feedback vis a vis the strengths and the value of the paper.
- Informing the editor about ethical issues like duplicate submission and so on.
- Providing constructive and informative review, with no personal comment or criticism that can cause bias in the evaluation.
- Making sure that the peer review process remains confidential.(Glonti et al.,2019 ; <https://www.editage.com/insights/top-peer-review-challenges-for-authors-and-how-you-can-solve-them>)

➤ **Reviewers' Work Overload**

It is well established and well recognized now that the demands and pressures of journals in terms of manuscripts' evaluation details and deadlines also make the reviewers' task a very challenging one. Good reviewers, who are already academics and teachers at university or higher education institutions, usually have multi-tasks to perform which range between teaching, supervising research, conducting research, directing institutional projects, and so on. They already have other several and non-stop academic or scientific commitments that they are obliged to prioritize the latter over a review request of a journal. Even if there is an acceptance on the part of the reviewer, given the fact that they are involved in many academic tasks, this may, in some cases, influence the quality of the reviewing and evaluation of a specific manuscript.

What is more to this central point is that in certain journals, there might be a limited number of reviewers in a specific field and in which the journal heavily relies on. If this is the case, then these reviewers will go through many pressure and will have many workload. They will be involved in a continuous process of reviewing, which may take months of sending feedback and correction and receiving them back and so on. Even in the presence of many reviewers, some journal editors may also tend to put the burden on the same group of reviewers again and again due to their expertise, experience, seriousness, deadline respect manners in the reviewing process and so on.

Editorial teams should also consider a central point. They should understand the key difference between being idealistic and being practical in inviting or selecting academics to become reviewers. Being idealistic means just selecting members according to their rank, while being practical means that the reviewing process involves more than a mere

academic rank. Being more idealistic means that the editorial board has a great number of reviewers. But in practical terms, it may happen that many reviewers are not relevant to the task and do not even accept reviewing the papers assigned to them by declining the invitation to review a paper. Their names are just added for other reasons related mainly to the acceptability and visibility of the journal reflecting reviewers from different ranks, different Algerian, and international, institutions, different related fields of specialization and so on.

To sum up this critical point. Given the fact that academic scholars have many pressure and many workloads, reviewing is always in competition with the other academic tasks that an academic is expected and required to adequately perform. As a consequence, the reviewing task is, sometimes, claimed to take some of the time that is meant for other academic tasks and activities. Besides that, journals also have a tendency to rely only on a specific group of reviewers all the time, which also contributes to making the tasks of reviewers very difficult to perform in the presence of other mandatory academic tasks.

➤ **Fatigue due to Work Overload**

A major challenge that Algerian reviewers face in relation to the previous challenge (workload) is that of fatigue. Due to the non-stop academic workload that teachers at university experience during the academic year, they tend to experience several phases of tiredness and fatigue. The latter makes it difficult for them to get involved in other tasks such as being reviewers in journals and the like.

➤ **Reviewing as a Voluntary Task**

Another serious challenge related to the previous two challenges (workload and fatigue) is that it is widely recognized in the Algerian journals that reviewing is a voluntary task. In most, if not all, cases, peer reviewers do the reviewing tasks in a voluntarily manner. They perform the tasks as voluntary service to the academic community. When performing such an academic task, the reviewer does not receive any financial reward. The general tendency of the Algerian journals in the humanities, mainly in Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, that are involved in this research is to provide certificates of expertise to reviewers. The absence of a financial reward with regard to the tasks performed, which require time and efforts, makes the reviewing task a tiring one. This may, in turn, encourage many reviewers to turn down invitations to review papers, especially if the reviewer has reached an academic position where certificates and expertise no longer become an incentive or attract attention (Breuning et al., 2015).

➤ **Reviewers' Lack of Interest or Incentives**

Once an academic reaches a certain point in their academic or scientific career, they are said to have little incentive to be a reviewer in a journal, especially in comparison to other academic tasks such as conducting research, writing and publishing research (articles and books), supervising doctoral research and so on. This does not provide a remarkably full added value to the academics' universities, but since the task of reviewers is always challenging, people who reach a given rank, as mentioned previously, prefer to join few journals or forsake the idea of joining journals at all.

➤ **Lack of Reviewers' Recognition**

The lack of recognition is also a serious issue or challenge that face journals and which always lead to dissatisfaction amongst reviewers (Irfanullah, 2021). This is a serious and a major challenge that Algerian reviewers face. That is to say, reviewers' efforts are not being valued and appreciated in any form (even in encouraging words) on the part of journal editors. Editors of Algerian academic, or scientific, journals should recognize and consider the fact that reviewers are the heart of the success of the reviewing process and the success of research publication, and hence the journal. In light of that, editors should

find a variety of appealing incentives for reviewers to promote reviewing (letters of recognition, etc.).

➤ **Complete absence of Training and Professional Development Opportunities**

A major factor that was emphasized by all the participants is that of training and professional development opportunities with regard to the reviewing matters. There is a general consent about the complete absence of training to become effective reviewers. Calls for reviewers are made on a regular basis and that is clearly seen on the ASJP platform and space of each Algerian journal. There is, however, no attempts or consideration in terms of providing the reviewers with ongoing training to help them understand the journal's requirements and expectations in terms of providing them with guidelines and criteria of evaluation.

In light of the above research findings vis à vis the reasons that encourage Algerian academics to become reviewers and in light of the major challenges that they face as reviewers, we recommend the following practical ideas for purposes of improving the reviewing experience and the reviewing process in Algerian journals as a whole. The overall objective is, of course, to enhance the communication of research and the publication of good quality manuscripts by first considering the critical situation of the Algerian reviewer through meeting expectation, challenges and needs.

The following central points reflect strategies to overcome the challenges that reviewers experience and face on a regular basis. All the strategies can be used by Algerian journal editors because they represent interesting ways to surmount the reviewers' challenges.

➤ **Providing Support for Reviewers through Recognition**

The lack of reviewer recognition impacts in a negative way the publication process. In many cases, the lack of recognition pushes the reviewers to decline invitations to peer reviewing requests and, hence, quality cannot be said to be ensured, especially if these reviewers are experts and qualified ones (Warne, 2016).

There should also be a continuous appreciation, respect and encouragement towards reviewers so that they keep performing reviewing tasks for journals. adopting proper strategies of reviewer' recognition contributes greatly to the success of the journal. This can be done using a variety of methods like providing an acknowledgment certificate. This is usually what is done by most Algerian journals since reviewers need the certificate to get promoted or to add it to their CV. Nowadays, there are even suggestions to add the reviewers' name on the published paper as a way to incentivize reviewers to get more involved and engaged in the reviewing tasks. Another very interesting strategy of recognition can be allowing reviewers to have free access of ebooks and articles published by the journal or other well known journals like Elsevier, Science Direct, TESOL Journal and so on. Another further possibility might even be providing financial support for reviewers to publish in well recognized journals like the ones named earlier (providing discounts) (Aczel et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2021). This would greatly raise reviewers' interest and motivation to join Algerian journals and become active and responsible reviewers who add positive value to the Algerian journals.

➤ **Annual Evaluation of National and International Boards**

Getting reviewers is always a challenging task for journal editors. Each year, journals should, however, review their editorial boards in annual meetings to take decision about the reviewing process as a whole and finding solution to the problems or challenges that face reviewers and journal editors (Foster, 2021).

➤ **Systemic Self Reflection Practices**

Systematic self reflection practices are essential to any journal (Wiley, 2021). They should be considered as a continuous critical practice. The editorial board of each Algerian journal should develop its own perspective vis a vis what forms a **good** and what forms a **poor-quality paper** following certain pre-defined and clear criteria. This would make the task of reviewers easier to a great extent and straightforward since they will gain more knowledge and details about what is required from them in the reviewing process to decide what to accept, what to reject, what kind of feedback is required and so on. That is to say, this would lower the pressures in the peer reviewing a paper and would lead to a consent among anonymous reviewers with regard to the quality of the research paper.

➤ **Recruiting Reviewers to Avoid Work Pressure and Ensure Quality**

Recruiting reviewers and enlarging the network makes the tasks of reviewing easy for many reviewers. This would lighten the workload that used to fall on some reviewers over other ones. Besides that, having more reviewers may contribute to the quality of the evaluation since each reviewer will receive just two or three articles per year to evaluate. We believe that this helps a lot in ensuring the quality of reviews.

➤ **Consideration and Respect of Reviewers' Evaluation**

It is true that it is the task of editors of journals to monitor their reviewers and to follow the reviewing process to ensure the success of research publication. But editors should also consider and respect the 'constructive' criticism (comments and feedback) provided by expert reviewers vis a vis the evaluation of papers. To explain more, if an editor goes against the serious recommendations of a reviewer, this will most probably create a risk that the reviewer will not volunteer once again and work with that specific journal and editor to evaluate any paper.

➤ **The Training of Reviewers**

Training reviewers has always been an issue (Bakker & Traniello, 2019; Callaham & Tercier, 2007). Nowadays, it is always focused on because it can significantly improve the quality of the peer-reviewing process (Hesselberg et al., 2020). It will help reviewers gain more knowledge and understanding as well as develop more skills that are related to reviewing. The belief is that this will make the reviewers' tasks more easier. Manuscripts should be reviewed by experts and professionals who have sufficient training as well as expertise to give constructive feedback or criticism for the material where authors can improve the quality of their work (language, method, analysis, references and so on).

➤ **Establishing Clear Guidelines and Criteria for Reviewers**

In line with the aspect of providing training, Algerian journals should also work towards establishing clear evaluation guidelines and criteria for reviewers to follow so that there will be no contradictions in evaluations. It happens that in many cases, reviewer A provides a positive review while Reviewer B provides a negative one. There must be a consent about the criteria of evaluation that all reviewers of a journal must consider and must respect. Any bias related to any reviewer's preference, not a research requirement, must be excluded.

Hence, a first step towards helping making the task of reviewing a straightforward one is by providing clear criteria for reviewers to consider in the evaluation of any paper. In this way, we can talk about a process of standardizing reviewers' expectations in a research paper and ensure the fact that they focus on what is required in terms of research methods, research writing and organization, research ethics, not what is wanted and preferred according to the taste of a reviewer-researcher with regard to the research paper before-hand.

➤ **Establishing and Implementing Strategies of Professionalization in Journals**

The Algerian journals in the humanities can develop and implement several strategies to work towards the professionalization of peer reviewing, and hence peer-reviewers. In this context, professionalization means the act of improving knowledge and skills through training and professional development workshops to engage Algerian reviewers in the important process or task of peer reviewing. It also means providing forms of reward or compensation for the tasks that reviewers perform.

Nowadays, there are, for instance, calls for developing **peer reviewer center and even academies**. Their role will be to offer trainings that journals could provide in various forms like face-to-face or online courses. The center or the academy will work on improving the quality of reviewers for purposes of improving the quality of reviewing and publication in the journal.

Since all the Algerian reviewers who have been involved in this research said that they are not trained in peer reviewing, there needs to be serious initiatives to provide solutions. The Algerian journals' editorial boards can provide in person courses that can offer effective training for a growing body of current or future reviewers like **young researchers, doctoral students**, and so on. This would, in turn, instill a desire and raise interest for reviewers to review research papers ; it would also provide them with detailed insights on the internal operations and requirements of the reviewing process and the journal as a whole.

➤ **Encouraging and Supporting the Creation of Specialized Journals in Didactics and Applied Linguistics**

The creation of specialized journals in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, as in any other field and discipline, is a urgent requirement nowadays. It is only in this way that we can solve issues related to peer-reviewing, peer-reviewers and publication in the Algerian contexts. We can also work towards providing solutions to the identified issues and challenges related to peer reviewers, peer reviewing process and publication challenges in the Algerian context.

Besides that, if a higher education institution possesses just one journal in the humanities and which publishes articles in Arabic, French and English, this might make the journal a less focused one since it involves a broad range of research published in three different languages, cultures and research focus. This is the case of the journal *Forum de L Enseignant* (ENS Constantine). Even in terms of language publication percentages, and from the point of view of a previous assistant editor in the journal, we can easily find that 50 % or more of the works published are in Arabic (Literature, language and linguistics). A limited percentage of 25 % is usually given to research published in French and another 25 % is devoted to research published in the English language. In light of the current calls to shift towards the use of the English language, not only in teaching, but also in research publication, we notice that this is still far from being achieved.

If each faculty, or even department, in an Algerian university created its own research publication journal, we strongly believe that this will lead to increasing research publication and contribute to the rising of the department, faculty and university. Specialized journals would also attract specific, and broader or international, audience (widen readership) in the scientific community, including users of research, readers, authors. In other words, this would increase authorship or scientific community.

➤ **Re-considering Reviewers' Efforts : Reviewing Should Become a Paid Task**

Predominantly, many reviewers are not paid for their efforts (Thompson et al., 2010). Nowadays, changing the research reviewing and publication practices should take place at many levels including the aspect of payment. A great deal of scholars would agree that performing reviewing tasks deserves a kind or reward. Algerian journals should move

towards paying reviewers ; peer-reviewing should not be considered as a voluntary or an unpaid task, especially if the Algerian journals aspire to achieve quality research evaluation and publication and become successful in the domain of scientific research publication world-wide.

It is a fact now that most, if not all, Algerian journals do not pay reviewers. The reason behind that is, probably, that there is little, if no, funding from the institutions and from the Ministry of Higher Education in Algeria. If this case is true, then the ministry and accordingly the higher education institutions should re-consider that in a serious manner.

In light of that, institutions should make decisions and take actions by re-considering devoting a specific budget to Algerian journals and paying reviewers. If this is ignored, in the short term, this will encourage many of reviewers, especially those who reach a higher position like professors and so on, to become very passive and reluctant to do the reviewing by either not joining journals at all or by turning down invitations of reviewing. That is to say, they will tend to reject the papers sent or assigned to them for evaluation.

Having said all this, I should also emphasize the central point that academics and research institutions should recognise peer review as a merit as well. What is more is the fact that paying Algerian reviewers should not be at the extent of the authors of research papers. This paper does not in any sense encourage Algerian journals to make it mandatory for authors to pay to have their papers published. But rather it is a call for the Algerian ministry of higher education to support and fund journals and hence contribute in the improvement and the development of research and publication in Algeria to stand against the international progress that universities all around the world experience.

4. Conclusion

The peer reviewing process is a central element in research publication. It significantly contributes to the quality of the works in a journal. There are many challenges that face quality research publication and should be addressed in order to ensure the success of the journal and the development of research evaluation and publication. The research hypothesis that stated that Algerian reviewers face serious challenges and have urgent needs to be met was confirmed. Some of the major challenges that are identified in this research and in the literature review as well is reviewers' challenges in the reviewing process, which involve : reviewing as a demanding activity, work overload, fatigue, scarcity of expert reviewers, unpaid activities, and lack of experience due to training absence.

In addition to that, peer reviewing requires serious improvement. Solutions to challenges and issues should be found. This involves creating incentives, recognizing reviewers, possibly providing remuneration for them, as well as investing in their continuous training to become expert reviewers who contribute to the quality of the journal. Algerian journals should promote professionalization of peer review. This can be achieved by a foundation of a 'reviewer academy' that would offer courses on peer reviewing.

Peer review is very essential and valuable practice. It greatly contributes to academic and scientific knowledge development. One main step to improve the quality of journals and academic and scientific research publication is to significantly consider peer reviewers' challenges and address them adequately.

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