A Putative Evaluation Scheme for Critical Appraisal of ELT Papers

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Abstract

Regarding the lack of consistency among ELT journals to evaluate papers, this research delves into how journal reviewers address the issue of determining the optimum paper to be published. In other words, this study aims at proposing a putative scheme to evaluate the papers submitted to ELT journals on a scientific and consistent basis. As such, 22 instructors and PhD students, selected through purposive sampling, were interviewed utilizing semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study were presented in the form of an evaluation scheme consisting of two major themes as two evaluation criteria*: content-related* and *strategy-related criteria*. The former includes *paper originality, research contribution, innovation and novelty,* and *method inclusiveness*; the latter consists of *succinctness, scene-setting adequacy, critical synthesis and analogy, implicational justification,* and *efficacy and consistency*. Implicationally, the results of this study demonstrates that reviewers across diverse ELT journals have substantial common criteria for paper publishing, that the ties uniting the ELT journals seeking to publish articles are strong, and that the potential for future ELT research regarding how authors inform one another on the criteria is correspondingly robust and consistent.

Keywords: ELT Journals, ELT papers, evaluation scheme, grounded theory, paper evaluation

1. Introduction

Published articles may entail a reliable form of scholarly information exchange. In other words, once a piece of scholarly research passes through evaluative processes and is published in a journal, other scholars may deal with it somehow perhaps by incorporating it into the established body of scientific knowledge, building on it further, figuring out its results, or trying to replicate it in other contexts. Since scholarly knowledge is cumulative and builds on itself, and no scholar would want to base their own work on someone else's unreliable study, so that its reliability is particularly important which may largely depend on journals' evaluation criteria. Therefore, evaluation in general and English Language Teaching (ELT) papers evaluation in particular is of significant importance nowadays due to the fact that we are involved in making decisions which affects the stakeholders' academic lives. Though different journals use different frameworks to decide whether to publish the ELT papers submitted or not, such local decisions greatly influence the reviewers' decisions. Most of the time, there is a possibility that the same paper receives different evaluation when assigned to the journals of the same country or in different countries. It makes the problem more complicated when the same paper is rejected by a journal and the other journal accepts the same paper with minor revision and this is a disaster for the academia of ELT.

The goal of this research is to develop an evaluation scheme of the considerations that a journal reviewer or editor ought to contemplate when selecting a submitted manuscript. Most academics are required to conduct research and publish the results. Paper selection is particularly important to journal reviewers because as Donovan (2003) explained:

> Although we all publish in a range of academic forms and forums, such as conference abstracts, book reviews, papers in conference proceedings, invited chapters, and books and monographs..., it is the peer-reviewed journal articles that receive the most notice from promotion panels and search committees… (p. 1)

In this respect, this study focuses on extracting the key categories and themes as the fundamental criteria to be taken into account by journal reviewers while evaluating the ELT papers submitted in order to make accurate decisions about their quality if they are prompted to pose appropriate critical questions concerning the quality of different sections in the papers. Implementation of the developed putative paper-evaluation scheme would increase the transparency and quality of research leading to effective informed decisions in the realm of ELT. In particular, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What codes do the participants signify as the major categories and themes for evaluating the ELT papers in the form of open, axial, and selective coding?

2. What model can be emerged to be used as a global evaluation scheme for all ELT journals?

2. Literature Review

Through the literature, diverse investigations can be found focusing on frameworks, models, and checklists utilized to evaluate the papers submitted to the academic journals. Each of them has emphasized the criticality of particular sections in the articles. For example, in the domain of paper abstracts, Koopman (1997) believes that abstracts serve the function of selling one's work, and thus they should be well-written. Therefore, he has proposed a checklist for abstract writing and evaluating. In his opinion, every abstract should contain five sections, namely motivation, problem statement, approach, results, and conclusions. The researcher also emphasizes that abstracts must be "self-contained capsule description" of papers. In addition, he maintains that the authors should provide some keywords following their abstracts to help editors assign papers to review committees and to facilitate keyword index searching. Moreover, DuRant's (1994) framework, which may be considered among the first investigations in this area, has especially accentuated the cruciality of evaluating the method section quality in the articles. DuRant (1994) maintains that "a substantial proportion of articles contain sufficient statistical and/or methodological mistakes to cast doubts on the stated conclusions" (p. 4). DuRant's (1994) main contribution in this area is that he presents questions related to the method section of research papers under four study designs, namely experimental or quasi-experimental design, survey or cross-sectional design, retrospective medical record reviews, and case control design. He claims that his checklist can "cover most of the areas where common problems occur" (p.4) in the respective research. However, his proposed checklist may not enable ELT reviewers to satisfy the respective journal objectives since its major focus is just on the method section of the articles, excluding their contribution to the relevant literature as well as ignoring the general quality of other sections of the articles.

Another crucial study in the realm of method-quality evaluation of research papers deals with Barbour's (2001) study, which concentrates mainly on the issues of rigor in research papers. The focus of his study is especially on the rigor-constitutive method components, i.e. the first enumerated five popular technical fixes associated especially with qualitative research, namely purposive sampling, grounded theory, multiple coding, triangulation, and respondent validation. Besides, he warns against the use of prescriptive checklists in evaluating qualitative research. However, though Barbour's (2001) study may strengthen journal reviewers' evaluation of paper rigor, it does not, in itself, confer rigor in qualitative research, and the proposed points in his study may not prompt a broad understanding of qualitative research design and data analysis, in general, let alone that of the other sections in an article. In the same vein related to the importance of evaluating issues of rigor

in research articles, Bornhöft, et al. (2006) take into account the external validity of papers, which, they believe, is often neglected in checklists which are used for evaluating research articles. Accordingly, they have developed a addresses assessment criteria related to internal validity, external validity and modal validity of papers. However, apart from its non-comprehensiveness, the checklist has been developed for clinical purposes, and may not be useful for planning and evaluation of ELT studies. As the authors themselves have recommended, the prospective users may be required to modify it according to their respective application and relevant research questions.

A crucial study, which has regarded most sections of research articles, was conducted by Letts et al. (2007), who provided some guidelines for the critical review of qualitative studies in general. Their critical-review guidelines consist of several components including citation, study purpose, literature, study design, design types, appropriateness of the study design, qualitative methods, sampling, data collection, data analysis, overall rigor, and conclusions and implications. In line with these components, the researchers have offered some procedures to help readers critically appraise qualitative research studies. However, though their guidelines include the evaluation of most sections of research papers, they have not been developed through inductive designs such as grounded theory, and therefore, they may be too comprehensively suggested by the authors for the evaluation of multidisciplinary papers. In other words, the proposed guidelines may be too general to be applied for ELT purposes, and may not totally support ELT-journal reviewers to evaluate ELT papers specifically.

Developing a pre-submission checklist for the authors, Crack, Gieves, and Lown (2011) maintain that journal editors can recommend authors complete the checklist before submitting their papers. In the researchers' opinion, authors' behavioral biases such as overconfidence about the likelihood of acceptance of their papers and their lack of patience in publishing their articles lead them to submitting odd and unpolished papers at a relatively early stage of production. Therefore, the researchers have advised authors to complete their proposed one-page checklist, which can help them in countering their behavior biases and in submitting a well-crafted work, before submitting their papers. However, such a behavioral checklist may not guarantee the high quality of contents or the sections of research articles, let alone the ELT-linked ones. This is a gap that Lovejoy, Revenson, and France (2011) were in pursuit of filling. They attempted to describe the elements of a high-quality review for journals, and further, offered some exemplar reviews of a manuscript accepted for a journal and commented on specific aspects of it. In fact, they developed their article to provide an overview of the peer-review process at a specific journal, Annals of Behavioral Medicine, which may again be irrelevant to the ELT domain.

Providing early-stage researchers with essential issues concerning structuring, writing, and publishing scientific papers, Derntl (2014) presented a series of guidelines based on the existing literature. In the article, he has first explained about different motivations for writing and publishing papers. Then,

he has explained different sections of a scientific paper in detail. Finally, the researcher has illuminated on writing for publication in general and the process of publishing research papers in academic journals and conference proceedings in particular. Also, following the same how-to-write trend, Henningsen (2015), drawing from various sources and based on his own experience as a PhD supervisor, has developed a checklist for manuscripts to be submitted to scientific journals. His checklist includes some important hints for writing scientific papers. However, it neglects points about the proper language, style, and content required for an academic paper. In fact, Henningsen's (2015) study has only provided some guidelines merely about manuscript preparation, paper resubmissions, the way the author should reply the editor or reviewer, and some recommendations not to submit to predatory journals which pretend to be peer-reviewed scientific journals but they publish nearly everything irrespective of the scientific quality as long as the author pays the publication fee.

The studies reviewed shows that no comprehensive study, considering the qualitative paradigm features, using grounded theory approach, benefiting from data saturation and running member checks, has been done to develop a model for specifically evaluating the ELT papers submitted to the journals. As there was no previous study on the issue in both global and local contexts, this study can be regarded as the first to extract the categories and themes leading to the development of a model or evaluation scheme for the critical appraisal of ELT papers.

3. Method

This study is a qualitative research, the design of which is Grounded Theory (GT), providing benchmarks on the way to extract categories, the way to associate between categories and the way to make categorical interconnections, building a justificatory scheme with which understanding the issue under study is characterized (Soozandehfar, 2015). This innovative methodology, entitled as grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967), utilizes a number of key strategies as its method to extract, restructure, and unite categories, and finally to create a theory or a model. The objective of GT is not confirmation of a former theory, or describing it, instead, it is clearly known by its unique attempt to explore a latent theory derived from the organized and inductive scrutiny of data pieces. As a result, the investigator comes up with a putative assumption in the form of a theory, model, or scheme as the outcome of the research, which delineates the central focus of the investigation (Glaser & Holton, 2004).

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 22 university instructors, who had taught the research course for more than three academic semesters, and PhD

candidates, who had published at least 5 qualified papers in 5 credible journals. Therefore, purposive sampling was practiced as the only criterion to interview the participants.

3.2. Instruments

To fulfill the objectives, the instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview, which is the primary method of data collection in grounded theory (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, & Razavieh, 2010). Some questions and hints rooted in the literature were given during this session to explore the major factors for the development of the evaluation scheme. Regarding issues of rigor, thick and rich descriptions were used to avoid bias with regard to the participants' viewpoints. Moreover, member checks were done to illuminate the participants' ideas as clearly as possible. Even for the particular words, the members' views were sought.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected through interviewing the candidates in detail. Each interview took about 30 to 45 minutes. The participants were informed with respect to the objectives of the study. The researcher benefiting from his experience did his best to extract rich, thick, and holistic descriptions of the members' viewpoints. Having data saturation as a key criterion of the qualitative design in mind, the interviews have been stopped as far as no new information was forthcoming.

3.4. Data Analysis

Following Ary et al. (2010), Soozandehfar (2015) extracted a set of methods, i.e. main techniques, from each of the three major approaches towards Grounded Theory: (1) Glaser and Strauss' (1967) as well as Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Systematic Grounded Theory, in which the constant comparative method and systematic coding were the primary analysis techniques; (2) Charmaz's (2006) Constructivist Grounded Theory, in which memoing was a key part of analysis; and (3) Gasson and Waters' (2013) Reflexive Grounded theory, in which researchers' reflections on their own pre-understandings, experience, and insights were critical aspects of analysis. This study took into account the major extracted techniques adopted by Soozandehfar (2015) as its data analysis procedures. Soozandehfar (2015) called this integrated method as Systematic Reflexive Constructivist Grounded Theory (SRCGT), which involves a step-by-step method including tabulation of sensitizing concepts and in vivo codes; open coding; initial memoing; axial coding; intermediate memoing; selective coding; advanced memoing; saturation; synthesis and modeling.
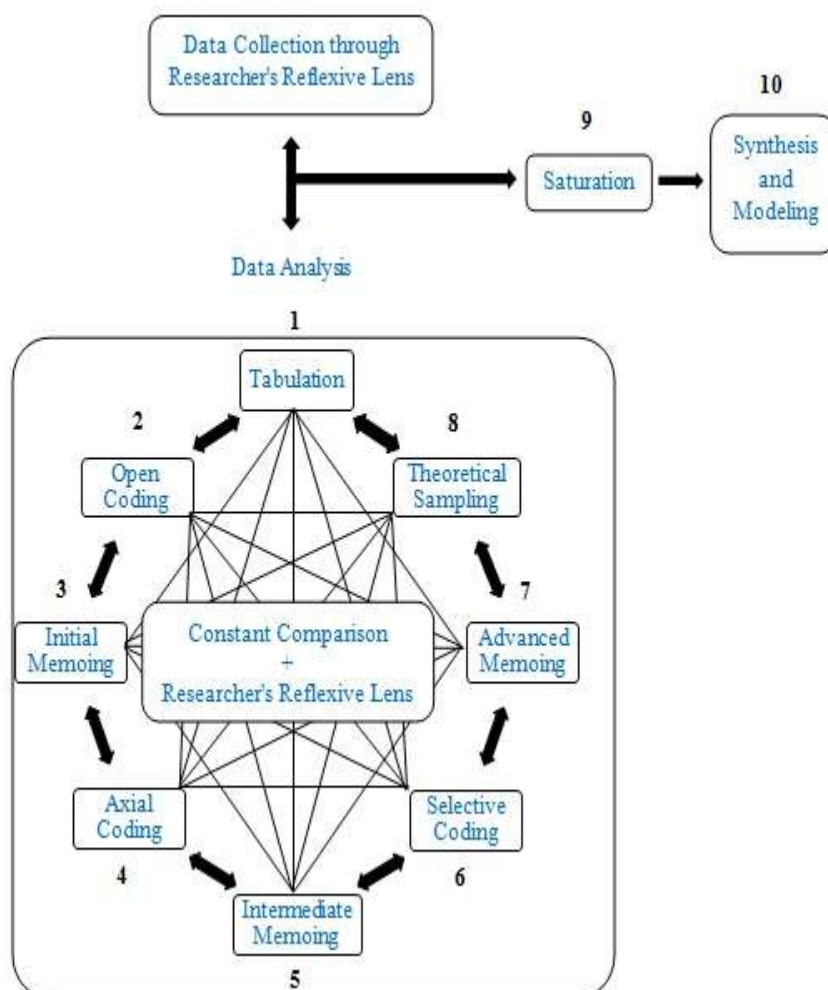
Figure 1. Data analysis in systematic reflexive constructivist grounded theory

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the qualitative analyses and results including the categories, extracted from the categorization process, and themes, emerged from the thematization process, to be taken into account while evaluating the ELT papers. Initially, the primary data gathered through semi-structured interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Having transcribed the data, the researcher began the open-coding process; that is, a large number of concepts related to ELT papers were identified. In other words, the sentences, phrases, and key words that carried weight in evaluating ELT papers were written down in the initial memos as the key criteria for the publishing a qualified paper. In addition, in initial memos, the open-coded data were read and reread several times and the units of meanings, events, points, ideas, behavior, etc. that appeared regularly and mentioned repeatedly by a majority of participants, i.e.

in vivo codes, were marked or labeled. The researcher came to a very wide range of codes in this step since much of the subject under the study was unknown to the researcher. Some significant exemplars of such open-coded concepts were selected to be presented here; the highlighted utterances in the following exemplars include the representative samples of the most crucial points mentioned by the participants.

- *With regard to ELT papers evaluation, the most the significant criterion is to see **whether the paper does have any contribution to the field or not** [1].*
- *If every aspect of the paper is perfect but it **violates originality** [2], as a reviewer we must put it aside.*
- *Papers must **present something new and bring about a sort of innovation** [3] to the field.*
- *Some researchers are not familiar with **how to prepare an abstract** [4]. Some key points are missing. Sometimes, there is **superfluous information** [5].*
- *An abstract should **consist of 200 to 250 words** [6] presenting the **key points of the main sections of research including background, method, results and conclusions along with the key words** [7].*
- *Some papers **lack introduction** [8] as a very important section of research.*
- *The paper should begin through **setting the scene for the readers** [9].*
- *Researchers must **provide a background for the audience** and **address the problem, the objectives as well as the research questions** [10].*
- *Most papers present **a report without any contribution** [11] on the part of the researchers.*
- *We expect literature review to be **in the form of a critical one addressing the weak and strong points** [12] of the studies done in that area.*
- *It is through criticism that we can **mention what the gap is** [13]. In other words we **present a clear picture of where we are and where we want to move** [14].*
- ***An in-depth and sound description of the design** [15] is required.*
- *In particular, researchers must **refer to what type of design** [16] they are using; **is it quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods** [17]?*
- *Researchers need **to elaborate on who the participants are** [18] and talk about some related issues like **age, major, gender, level of education, field of study, and the like** [19].*
- *Papers must describe **the site of data collection** [20].*
- ***How the participants are selected** [21] can be a key element in evaluating the papers.*
- *Researchers must **elaborate on what materials** [22] they use especially in experimental designs.*

- *A clear picture of the instruments like questionnaires or tests [23] must be provided along with their **reliability and validity** [24]**, and also **dependability and credibility for observations and interviews** [25].*
- ***Ethical consideration must be reported** [26], too.*
- *It needs to be noted that there is **no conflict of interest for the participants** [27] at the time of data collection.*
- *Full presentation of **how the date are collected and analyzed** [28] needs to be mentioned.*
- *Most of the time **the researchers do not write clearly** [29]. So many questions are raised by the reviewers including who, what, where, why, when, how much and how many.*
- *We expect them **to illuminate the results clearly and adequately** [30] and do their best to **avoid superfluous information** [31].*
- ***The discussion needs to be deep not shallow** [32]. Most of the time the researchers forget literature review. Here it is time to present to talk about it once more.*
- ***In our discussions, we must compare our findings with the ones reported and criticized before** [33].*
- ***Justifying and contextualizing the findings** [34] with regard to the research questions is warranted.*
- ***In the conclusion section, the researchers need to go beyond findings and results and refer to the contribution of the current study** [35] to the field.*
- *Researchers need **to answer the question of if the researcher did not do the current study, what would happen** [36].*
- ***Elaborating on the implications** [37] of the study is also a crucial matter.*
- *As research is generative we **expect researchers to open new horizon of lines of research especially for the novice researchers** [38].*
- *Most papers have **problems with language** [39] and such problems do not allow the reviewers to focus on the content.*
- *The reviewers would **take a negative attitude as soon as they see the language is not checked** [40].*
- *Due to the idea that **research is systemic, organization is a key point** [41] in evaluating the papers.*
- *It is a must **to be consistent in following the style accepted by all scholars** [42].*
- ***Researchers in the field must follow APA style of writing** [43].*
- ***Using recent publications and proving a text which is readable** [44] are so important.*
- *I think the topic of research must be **checked if it is unique or not** [45].*
- ***The first thing that reviewers must consider is plagiarism** [46], which is very important to me.*

- *Papers must adequately elaborate on the significance of their topics [47].*
- *It's very important to take into account **the strength of stated problems in the papers in terms of the evidence given**[48].*
- *I guess the **studies which are reviewed in the literature must be recent and new** [49].*
- *The **topic of the paper should be something new and worth researching** [50].*
- *It is very important for researchers **to carefully explain the conceptual or theoretical framework of their study because it would be regarded as the basis of research questions** [51].*

Through axial coding and intermediate memoing, all the concepts, or subcategories, identified during open-coding and initial memoing were set together and the core categories were determined. In fact, different points were repeatedly stated by the participants in line with the above exemplar concepts or subcategories identified during the open-coding process. Accordingly, a number of core categories accounting for the different aspects of an ELT paper emerged out of these exemplars through the process of categorization. The extracted core categories are described in light of some pieces of the participants' comments as verbatim, i.e. in vivo codes, to make the reader familiar with the participants' viewpoints and world. The first important core category that appeared in the participants' statements was *paper originality* (Exemplar 2, 45, & 46). Several points were repeatedly mentioned by the participants in different ways about the originality through different related aspects such as absence of plagiarism and exclusiveness. In addition, the participants highlighted other issues reduced to another core category, i.e. *research contribution* (Exemplars 1, 11, 36, 47, & 48), through axial coding and intermediate memoing. In other words, most of the participants had a consensus over the fact that the under-reviewed papers must add some valuable information to or fill some crucial gaps in the existing literature in one way or another. Also, checking the significance of the paper topic, researchers' reasons for conducting their studies, and the strength of stated problem were emphasized by many of the participants.

The third core category inferred from the participants' viewpoints through axial coding and intermediate memoing was *innovation and novelty* (Exemplar 3, 49, & 50). This core category emerged out of the participants' diverse viewpoints, i.e. saying the same thing from different perspectives such as the novelty of the selected topics, the recency of the studies reviewed in the literature, and the innovation that must be inherent in the research findings. The fourth extracted core category dealt with *succinctness* (Exemplars 4, 5, 6, & 7). In participants' views, researchers' must recognize the primary information from the superfluous one. In other words, instead of providing the readers with the essential information regarding different sections of a research paper such as background, method, results, and conclusion, they include detailed information which is seldom informative, especially within an abstract, which

was mostly focused on by the participants in this regard. The fifth core category extracted through axial coding and intermediate memoing was concerned with *scene-setting adequacy* (Exemplars 8, 9, 10, 11, 47, 48, & 51), which includes the participants' viewpoints on a number of key characteristics, such as an adequate introduction, an evidenced problem, a clear objective, a well-laid significance, and a relevant conceptual or theoretical framework of the study.

The sixth extracted core category encompasses the participants' accentuation on *critical synthesis and analogy* (Exemplars 12, 13, 14, 32, 33, & 34), i.e. writing critically and in a synthetic way, especially regarding the gap-inducing evaluation of previous studies related to the subject in hand, as well as the inclusion of the most recent studies in the literature. Moreover, this core category expects researchers to provide the necessary information about the topic in relation to the previous studies. Especially, the participants' focus was on the researchers need to present the results of their studies through critically and argumentatively discussing, comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing their results with those of other studies. The seventh core category extracted through axial coding and intermediate memoing dealt with *method all-inclusiveness* (Exemplars 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, & 28). As it can be observed in the interview exemplars above, the design of the study is the first to be determined in a clear way in the method section. Moreover, detailed and comprehensive information regarding the participants, the sampling strategy used to select participants, the context of the study, and data instruments should be provided in this section. Other important elements to be included in this section according to the interviewees include information concerning data collection and data analysis procedures. Furthermore, the ethical issues of the study need to be dealt with in the method section. In addition, this core category was also concerned with the participants' emphasis on research rigor, i.e. issues of rigor in research such as reliability, validity, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

The eighth core category pertains to *implicational justification* (Exemplars 34, 35, 36, 37, & 38), which explains the participants' views mostly relevant to answering the "so what" question of the readers of the study. That is, given the results of the study, what conclusions can be made, and what uses the results of the study can be put into. In other words, what are the implications of the study for various people or institutes? To achieve this aim, the participants are in agreement that researchers are expected to present the results of the study very briefly by restating the research questions, and then to go beyond and justify the results by stating the implications of the study. Finally, this core category includes the participants' consensus over the fact that the researcher should provide some suggestions for other researchers so that they might investigate the topic in hand from other respects and cast more light on the topic. The ninth core category, which is the final one extracted through axial coding and intermediate memoing, is pertinent to *efficacy and*

consistency (Exemplars 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, & 44), which touches on all sections of papers, particularly, referring to the overall adequacy of the language of the study, as well as the issues related to organization, APA style, coherence, and cohesion of the study, which, in the participants' viewpoints, must be dealt with adequately throughout the study.

After the categorizational processes of open coding and axial coding, facilitated through initial and intermediate memos, the extracted core categories were refined and honed through the thematization processes of selective coding and advanced memoing, and were reduced into two major themes encompassing all the previously-extracted core categories and subcategories. These cover themes included *research content* and *research strategy*, which are relevant to the contents of research and strategies of writing papers, respectively, which can be taken into account by the ELT journal reviewers. Figure 1 illuminates the total results of this study in the form of a putative evaluation scheme for the critical appraisal of ELT papers.
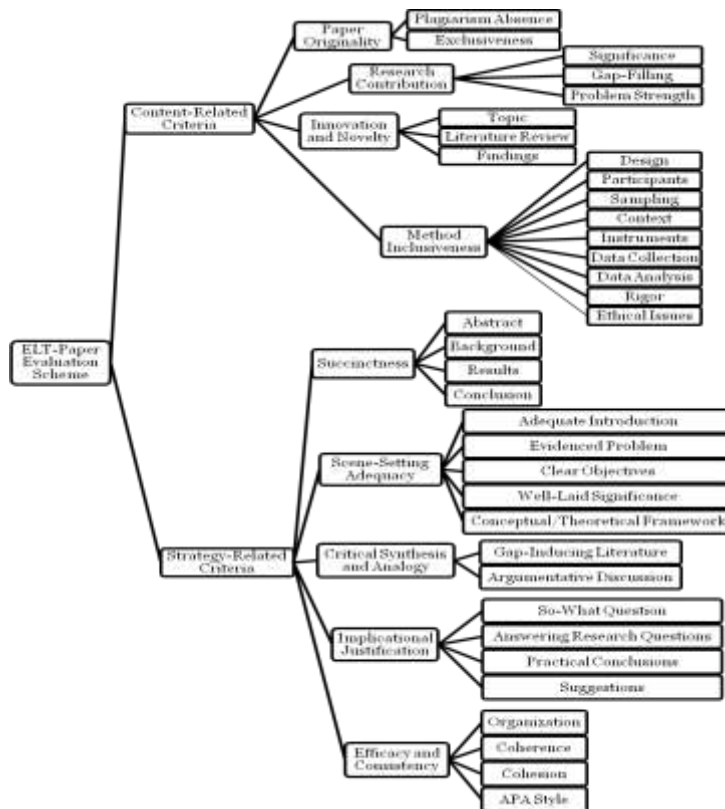

Figure 1. A putative evaluation scheme for critical appraisal of ELT papers

Giving weight to each of the extracted categories, this study put the above scheme into a Likert-scale frame in order for the reviewers to utilize it in a more convenient way. In other words, each subcategory was given a scoring choice from one to five showing the reviewers' judgment about the strength of each. As a result, there would be a total score for each core category, and an overall score summing all. Below is this Likert-scale evaluation scheme.

Table 1
Likert-Scale Evaluation Scheme

Themes	Core Categories	Subcategories						Total
Cont ent-Related Criteria	Paper Originality	Plagiarism Absence						
		Exclusiveness						
	Research Contribution	Significance						
		Gap-Filling						
		Problem Strength						
	Innovation and Novelty	Topic						
		Literature Review						
		Findings						
	Method Inclusiveness	Design						
		Participants						
		Sampling						
		Context						
		Instruments						
		Data Collection						
		Data Analysis						
		Rigor						
		Ethical Issues						
Strate gy-Related Criteria	Succinctness	Abstract						
		Background						
		Results						
		Conclusion						
	Scene-Setting Adequacy	Introduction Adequacy						
		Evidenced Problem						
		Clear Objectives						
		Well-Laid Significance						
		Conceptual/Theoreti cal Framework						
	Critical Synthesis/Analogy	Gap-Inducing Literature						
		Argumentative Discussion						
	Implicational Justification	So-What Question						
		Answering Research Questions						
		Practical Conclusions						
		Suggestions						
	Efficacy and Consistency	Organization						
		Coherence						
		Cohesion						
		APA Style						
Sum of Totals								
Overall Evaluation		Accepted	151-180					
		Minor Revisions Required	121-150					
		Major Revisions Required	91-120					
		Not Accepted	1-90					

Overall Comments:

As it was illustrated in Figure 1, this study presented its findings in the form of an evaluation scheme for the critical appraisal of ELT papers by journal reviewers. This scheme includes two major themes functioning as two major criteria to appraise the ELT articles by the journal reviewers: *content-*

related and *strategy-related criteria*. In fact, the two extracted themes from the participants' viewpoints imply that the authors may have to take into account two crucial perspectives when writing an ELT paper, and on the other hand, the reviewers can assess the ELT papers mainly through these two criteria. Accordingly, papers should be assessed firstly based on their contents. In addition, they should be evaluated in terms of using effective strategies in order to justify the significance and value of the research topic. The first major criterion may be in line with most of the reviewed studies in the literature which have focused on a variety of content-related facets. The main content-related factor proposed in this study to be considered by ELT-journal reviewers is the extent of *originality* of their paper; papers should be checked in terms of the interested topic to see the extent of their exclusiveness as well as their probable plagiarism, maybe through credited online plagiarism checkers. This content-related aspect can be congruent with the findings of Letts et al. (2007), who provided some guidelines for the critical review of qualitative studies in general, one important aspect of which consists of citation and referencing problems.

Another crucial content-related criterion proposed in this study for the evaluation of ELT papers deals with papers' extent of *contribution* to the respective area. In other words, the under-reviewed papers must add some valuable information to or fill some crucial gaps in the existing literature in one way or another. Also, the significance of the paper topic, researchers' reasons for conducting their studies, and the strength of stated problem pertain to this content-related criterion. This criterion may be in agreement with Koopman's (1997) focus on abstracts, which he maintains, serve the function of selling one's work, and thus they should be well-written. In other words, Koopman's (1997) emphasis on the quality of abstracts and his relevant notion of "self-contained capsule description" in this regard may imply the contribution of the respective research in its relevant area. Also, *innovation and novelty*, which is another proposed content-related evaluation criterion in this study, can be in line with Koopman's (1997) focus on the quality of abstracts, indicating the innovative nature of the related research.

Moreover, the content-related criterion of *method inclusiveness* can be congruent with DuRant's (1994) framework, which accentuates the cruciality of evaluating the method section quality in the articles. DuRant (1994) presents questions related to the method section of research papers under four study designs, namely experimental or quasi-experimental design, survey or cross-sectional design, retrospective medical record reviews, and case control design. Also, this criterion can be in line with Barbour's (2001) study, which concentrates mainly on the issues of rigor in research papers, especially on the rigor-constitutive method components, i.e. the first enumerated five popular technical fixes associated especially with qualitative research, namely purposive sampling, grounded theory, multiple coding, triangulation, and respondent validation. Besides, this criterion can be a confirmation of what Bornhöft, et al. (2006) take into account regarding the rigor and external validity of papers, which, they believe, is often neglected in checklists which

are used for evaluating research articles. In fact, in congruency with this criterion, Bornhöft, et al. (2006) have also developed a checklist which addresses assessment criteria related to internal validity, external validity and modal validity of papers. In general, the content-related criteria proposed in the present study can also be in line with the objectives that Lovejoy, Revenson, and France (2011) were in pursuit of, i.e. ensuring high quality of contents or the sections of research articles through providing an overview of the peer-review process to describe the elements of a high-quality review for journals.

With regard to *strategy-related criteria*, this study proposed five strategies to be taken into account by both authors and reviewers. In fact, these strategies indicate that content appropriacy may not suffice for the evaluation of research quality, and actually, there are several other strategic factors beyond research content to be considered which can promote the quality of an ELT paper. One of the strategy-related factors proposed in this study deals with *succinctness*, which may have to be taken into consideration by researchers while writing several sections of their papers such as abstract, background, results, and conclusion. The concise nature of paper writing suggested by this strategy-related criterion can be in line with the critical-review guidelines proposed by Letts et al. (2007) in terms of several components including the statement of study purpose, literature, study design, design types, sampling, data collection, data analysis, rigor, conclusions, and implications. In other words, the guidelines suggested by Letts et al. (2007) imply such succinctness in each of the sections mentioned. Furthermore, Henningsen's (2015) study, which provided some guidelines about manuscript pre-submission and preparation, may be in line with the strategy-related criteria in the present study to be considered by authors before submitting their papers. In fact, researchers should check whether or not they have observed the features of *succinctness*, *critical synthesis and analogy, scene-setting adequacy, implicational justification,* and *efficacy and consistency.*

All in all, only some parts of the findings of the present study may be in line with the results of former research in the realm of ELT-paper evaluation. In fact, most of the findings in the present study can be regarded as newly explored criteria for the evaluation of ELT papers that might have been neglected in previous ELT-related investigations or former ELT-journal checklists. Mostly, the literature in this area has focused on some content-related features in a partial way, and actually, has rarely accentuated the strategy-related criteria proposed in the present study. Developing such a putative evaluation scheme for assessing ELT research papers, this study hopes to obviate the present discrepancies between the evaluation checklists applied by different ELT journal reviewers.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This investigation was an attempt to see how ELT journal reviewers deal with the issue of accepting a paper to be published. In fact, this study intended to

develop a putative scheme for all ELT journal reviewers to apply in the assessment of ELT papers. To this end, the researcher of this study interviewed 22 instructors and PhD students, chosen through purposive sampling. An evaluation scheme was proposed as the final result of this study encompassing two crucial themes as two evaluation criteria, i.e. *content-related* and *strategy-related criteria*. The content-related criteria consist of the four features of *paper originality, research contribution, innovation and novelty,* and *method inclusiveness*; the strategy-related criteria include the five features of *succinctness, scene-setting adequacy, critical synthesis and analogy, implicational justification,* and *efficacy and consistency*.

The *content-related criteria* refer to the features that should be checked to assess the quality of paper content. One of them is *paper originality*, i.e. checking the paper in terms of plagiarism as well as its exclusiveness, i.e. to what extent the topic of the research is unique. By *research contribution*, the reviewers can assess the paper to see how strong the research significance, problem, and gap have been elaborated on and justified. *Innovation and novelty* refers to the extent of topic novelty, and also to the extent of recency of the studies reviewed in the literature, as well as to the extent of innovation the findings of the paper may bring about. *Method inclusiveness* pertains to the quality of method subsections, and how complete and strong the subsections including design, participants, sampling, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, rigor, and ethical issues are elaborated on and justified.

The *strategy-related criteria* are pertinent to some features beyond the content quality of the paper. They include some strategies that the authors of the papers should observe if they are about to put their papers into a high-quality research frame. Accordingly, journal reviewers can also take them into account if they are supposed to select the high-quality ELT papers. One of the strategies refers to *succinctness*, i.e. to what extent the paper abstract, background, results, and conclusion are concisely explained while at the same time their quality, relevance, accuracy, and clarity are maintained. By *scene-setting adequacy*, the reviewers can assess how adequately the introduction is presented, how documentedly the problem is stated and how it is justified through credited evidence, how clearly the objectives are explained, how well the significance of the research is illuminated to the reader, and to what extent the conceptual/theoretical framework enables the reader to perceive the relevance of the research in the realm of ELT.

As another strategy-related criterion, *critical synthesis and analogy* refers to evaluating the way the literature review and the discussion is presented. In fact, this criterion requires the researchers to present their literature reviews in a critical, synthetic, and analogical way. The author should criticize, compare, contrast, and synthesize the former studies in a way leading to the illumination of the gap significance. On the other hand, the discussion should be presented in relation to the literature review in an argumentative and critical way. In fact, reading the discussion, the reader must be able to recognize the significant position or contribution of the findings among other

relevant studies reviewed in the literature. *Implicational justification* refers to the strategic interpretation of the results. In other words, the researcher must justify the findings in relation to their respective practical uses. Researcher must be able to show the contribution of findings in the respective real context so as to justify their usefulness and relevance. This strategy should also be observed while answering the research questions; interpretations used in answering the questions should put the reader's mind into the respective real context. Besides, the research conclusions and suggestions should also be justified implicationally. Finally, *efficacy and consistency* refers to how efficiently the paper is organized, and how coherent and cohesive the language of the paper is, and to what extent the paper is following the APA style of writing.

It is worth mentioning that the present evaluation scheme is a flexible one in the sense that the journal reviewers can put each of its components into an open-ended (e.g. what is your idea or comment about this category?) form as their overall evaluation of each component as well as an open-ended space for their overall judgment about the whole paper (e.g. what is your overall idea or comment about this paper) on the basis of the scheme. Implicationally, the present study hopes that ELT journal reviewers take into account its findings as substantial common criteria for paper publishing, and consider it as a powerful uniting tie for accepting and publishing the optimal articles. In fact, the proposed evaluation scheme may be able to provide the potential for future ELT research regarding how authors inform one another on the criteria if ELT journals commonly consider it as a robust and consistent scheme.

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