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Research Article

Building Reviewer Competence for Early-Career Researchers in Foreign Language Education: An Expert-Based Needs Analysis

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Abstract: Designing effective peer review training programs requires a profound understanding of the challenges and needs of early career researchers (ECRs). This qualitative study reports on the development process of a needs analysis conducted before a peer review training initiative was prepared in the field of foreign language education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three journal editors and two peer review experts who were selected for their expertise in scholarly publishing and academic literacy. The thematic analysis framework proposed by Clarke and Braun (2006) was adopted to analyze qualitative data and identify patterns in expert opinions. The findings were structured around three key themes: 1) Early career researchers (ECRs) have limited knowledge and experience with the peer review process, along with a lack of self-confidence and guidance; 2)the prominence of field expertise, critical thinking skills, and ethical awareness among the core competencies required for effective peer review; 3) the pressing need for programs delivered in a blended format, utilizing technology and digital tools effectively, and supported by ethical principles and practical content. The significance of supportive mechanisms such as mentoring, recognition, and certification in sustaining motivation was also highlighted. In line with the findings, a comprehensive needs analysis incorporating expert opinions was developed, covering both qualitative and quantitative aspects. This research is expected to inform the development of tailored programs that focus on effectively peer reviewing skills based on contextual needs.

Keywords: *Peer review training, ECR, needs analysis, ethical guidelines*

INTRODUCTION

The peer review system is regarded as a fundamental pillar in the production and dissemination of academic knowledge. It is critical for improving the credibility of the scientific community, assessing the quality of knowledge, and ensuring the sustainability of academic discourse (Tennant et al., 2017). At the same time, peer review has been subjected to criticism due to a lack of transparency, inconsistent quality of evaluations, and limited empirical knowledge of how it is conducted in practice (Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020). This system offers both opportunities and challenges, especially for early-career researchers (ECRs). While peer review provides benefits for ECRs to engage with the research community, it is apparent that they are often unprepared for the peer review process, as their evaluation skills are developed through experience rather than formal training (Rodríguez-Bravo et al., 2017; Publons, 2018). Previous research has established that ECRs shoulder a significant portion of the global peer review workload, but they often learn how to review by analysing reports on their own submissions or through informal mentoring rather than through

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structured training (Muñoz-Ballester & Robel, 2021; Nicholas et al., 2025; Publons, 2018; Rodríguez-Bravo et al., 2017).

The active involvement of the ECRs in the peer review process is of strategic importance for the future sustainability of the academic community. However, it is not enough to offer only practical experience to support this group; it has been demonstrated that systematic, context-sensitive, and pedagogically designed training is also essential (Huber et al., 2022; Mansoor, 2021). Studies on researcher development reveal that training needs vary significantly depending on disciplinary conventions and local editorial expectations (Bhakta & Boeren, 2016). This highlights the importance of needs analyses that are sensitive to specific disciplinary contexts. In light of this, conducting a thorough needs analysis before designing a peer review training is a crucial step for shaping both the training content and its ethical, technological, and methodological foundations.

The landscape of peer review is evolving beyond a classical knowledge transfer model to a multi-layered structure that encompasses digitalization, open science practices, and meta-evaluation processes (Reinhart & Schendzielorz, 2024). This transformation demands a new approach to peer review processes on the part of ECRs in disciplines such as language education. Not only content knowledge, but also competencies such as analyzing scientific writing, recognizing ethical principles, and using digital tools effectively have become prerequisites for contemporary peer reviewing (Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020).

Within the applied linguistics and foreign language education context, previous studies on the subject of peer review and publishing practices have investigated the perceptions of reviewers, editorial expectations, research ethics, and transparency (Coniam, 2012; Marsden, Morgan-Short, Trofimovich, & Ellis, 2018; Mohammadi, Amini Farsani, & Nazmi, 2023; Silver, Lin, & Sun, 2023; Yaw, Plonsky, Larsson, Sterling, & Kytö, 2023). However, the existing foreign language education literature does not report empirical studies which systematically determine the training needs of ECRs as journal reviewers in these fields or investigate the development of a context-specific needs analysis instrument to support the design of peer review training.

Addressing this gap in the field, the main purpose of this study is to present the development process of a context-specific needs analysis instrument constructed before designing a sustainable peer review training programme for ECRs in the field of foreign language education. In this process, the skills, attitudes, and pedagogical structures that were highlighted were determined through field editors and expert opinions, and the needs analysis tool was revised based on the analysis results. Structured through thematic analysis of expert feedback, this process has provided a theoretical basis for subsequent training design and resulted in an evaluation framework integrating pedagogical, ethical, and technological dimensions for use in foreign language education contexts.

Based on the concerns above, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What challenges do peer review experts believe early-career researchers encounter when conducting effective peer reviews in foreign language education?
2. What core skills and ethical guidelines should early-career researchers possess to conduct effective peer reviews?
3. What instructional formats, resources, and support systems are suggested to help novice reviewers improve their peer review skills?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical basis of this needs analysis research is grounded in three key interconnected viewpoints: critical pedagogy, ethical decision-making, and reflective practice. These frameworks not only shape how ECRs are involved in the peer review in foreign language education, but also guide the decisions regarding methodology and interpretation throughout the phases of data collection and refining the instrument. As needs analysis goes beyond mere data collection and serves as a purposeful, theory-driven process for identifying competencies, challenges, and learning gaps of a specific population, this study combines various theoretical lenses to ensure thoroughness, relevance, and alignment with the overall objectives of professional development in the peer review process.

Critical pedagogy is based on foundational work of Paulo Freire (1970) and encourages individuals to take control of their own learning while fostering critical examination of institutional structures. This orientation provides a valuable framework for understanding the challenges faced by early-career researchers, especially within the complex and non-transparent systems of peer review and academic publishing (Tennant et al., 2017). This study approaches peer review through a critical perspective, highlighting it not just as a technical procedure but as a socially embedded practice influenced by academic authority and gatekeeping mechanisms (Reinhart & Schendzielorz, 2024). Therefore, understanding the roles of early-career researchers in peer review processes and the power dynamics within these processes constitutes an important aspect of the training design.

The second pillar of the study centers on ethical decision-making in the peer review process. In line with the ethical principles set out by COPE (2022), transparency, academic integrity, and reviewer responsibility should be at the heart of the peer review practice. Peer review poses numerous ethical challenges, which encompass concerns regarding anonymity, fairness, and how to provide constructive feedback with the appropriate tone and detail (COPE, 2022). Rodríguez-Bravo and his colleagues (2017) revealed that early career researchers do not receive sufficient formal training in identifying and handling conflicts of interest or in delivering constructive feedback. These shortcomings may increase the risk of violating ethical standards in the peer review process. It is also noted that inconsistencies in the reviewer's attitude can lead to a diminished trust in the process (Aczel et al., 2021). Consequently, ethical principles need to be addressed directly and comprehensively during the peer review process.

The final fundamental component of the peer review training process is the cultivation of reflective practice skills. This concept is founded on the groundbreaking research conducted by Schön (1983) regarding professional learning. Reflective practice is an ongoing process in which individuals evaluate their own decisions, foundational beliefs, and the feedback they offer to others to inform future actions and choices (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Schön, 1983). In the peer review context, this kind of reflection enables early-career researchers (ECRs) to evaluate submitted manuscripts while also examining the rationale behind their assessments, thus strengthening their academic integrity and judgement. Ryan (2012) stresses the importance of reflective learning in higher education for cultivating critical thinking and a sense of professional responsibility, which are essential in the peer review process. Furthermore, reflective practice is intrinsically connected to the development of feedback literacy, which involves the ability to interpret, assess, and utilize feedback effectively (Carless & Boud, 2018). Integrating reflective practice into reviewer training can help early-career researchers to produce not only formally accurate but also pedagogically valuable, respectful, and development-oriented reviews. This approach frames peer review as a dual opportunity for evaluation and instruction, fostering a culture of scholarly communication and continuous professional development.

Synthesizing these three viewpoints, the current study conceptualizes peer review training for ECRs in foreign language education as a critical, ethical, and reflective learning process rather than a purely technical skill. From this standpoint, identifying key competencies, attitudes, and types of support ECR reviewers need becomes a foundational step. The expert-guided needs analysis tool developed in this study transforms these theoretical principles into a domain-specific framework for designing and evaluating peer review education in the field.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate the competencies and developmental needs of early-career researchers in the field of foreign language education before designing a structured peer review training program. To achieve this aim and gain further in-depth exploration, this study was carried out as qualitative research. The study adopted a basic qualitative study design, which focuses on constructing and interpreting real-life experiences of people (Merriam & Tisdel, 2016). The benefit of this design is that it allows participants to reflect on their perceptions and experiences of the peer review process within their professional context.

Setting

The data collection process was carried out online via Zoom meetings. Conducting the interviews online allowed for flexible scheduling and facilitated the researcher's access to experts with high academic responsibilities in different cities. These virtual meetings enabled the interviews to proceed in a focused and real-time dialogue and provided rich, context-specific qualitative data for analysis.

Participants

The sampling of the study consisted of five participants, including three senior editors in reputable journals in the field of English Language Teaching and two internationally recognized peer review training experts. The rationale for inclusion criteria is that ELT editors offer a practice-based perspective on reviewer quality, reviewer behavior, and evaluation standards, whereas peer review experts can provide a systematic and pedagogical framework for reviewer training, ethical principles, and standards for the peer review process. Purposive sampling was adopted to select participants with high levels of expertise in academic publishing and peer review training. Therefore, this sampling strategy made it possible to reach participants who are qualified to evaluate peer review practices from both editorial and educational perspectives. All participants work at different institutions and have been actively engaged in both academic publishing processes and evaluation practices for many years. They were informed about the purpose and ethical rules of the research, and it was explicitly stated that the interviews were voluntary and recordings would only be used for research purposes. Demographic information of the participants is presented in the following table. They were represented as ''P'' when presenting findings.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

Participant	Gender	Academic title	Years of experience	Expertise role
P1	Female	Assist. Prof.	27	Editor in national and international journals
P2	Male	Prof.	31	Editor in international journals
P3	Male	Assoc. Prof.	20	Editor in an international journal
P4	Female	PhD	10	Peer review and scholarly publishing specialist
P5	Male	PhD	25	International peer review training expert and scholarly publishing specialist

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were developed based on the literature review and finalized with expert opinions. The interview questions covered themes such as challenges faced by early-career researchers in the peer review process, required skills, ethical awareness, motivation, technological expectations, and the structural features of the training program. The interviews were conducted one-on-one with each expert and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Participants were informed that their participation would be voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any given stage. They were also assured that their identities would be kept confidential and anonymous. All of the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview process was conducted by the researchers, and open-ended and non-directive questions were asked to enable the participants to provide detailed insights.

Procedures for Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method proposed by Clarke and Braun (2006). In this phase, first, the interview transcripts were read carefully, and then they were divided into meaningful units, and initial coding was performed. The MAXQDA software was used to support systematic coding and organization. Expressions that show similarities between the codes were grouped, and themes were formed. The themes were organized in relation to the research questions, and based on the emerging findings, a draft of the needs analysis form was prepared. This draft was presented to the same experts again to ensure content validity, and the final version was created accordingly. Throughout the analysis process, the researcher considered the impacts of her experience and position on the interpretation in the field; thus, a reflexive approach was adopted by reviewing the coding at regular intervals to reduce bias.

To establish a trustworthy thematic analysis, the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed. To ensure credibility, the themes were supported by direct quotations from the participant statements, and interpretations were carefully checked to ensure that they were compatible with the data. In addition to this, after the themes were created, the participants were contacted again to get feedback on whether these themes precisely reflected their experiences, and essential adjustments were made in line with the feedback received. In terms of transferability, the professional competence of the participants, context, and data collection process were clearly described. This enables researchers to assess whether the findings are transferable to their own settings. Regarding dependability and confirmability, the researcher tried to minimize the impact of her own position on the analysis process. Codes and themes were reviewed through comparative analysis, and the consistency of the findings and interpretations was subjected to external evaluation through a peer debriefing process with an external expert in the field.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of expert interviews provided valuable insights into the challenges, competencies, ethical principles, instructional formats, and support mechanisms required to improve the peer review capabilities of early-career researchers (ECRs) in the field of foreign language education. This analysis is structured according to the three research questions that underpin this study.

1. Perceived Challenges Faced by Early-Career Researchers in Conducting Effective Peer Reviews

The first research question in this study sought to determine the challenges faced by ECRs in conducting effective peer reviews, as perceived by journal editors and peer review experts. Table 2 presents sub-themes and codes related to the challenges encountered by early-career researchers.

Table 2. *Challenges faced by ECRs*

Sub-theme	Codes	*f*
Lack of training and awareness	Lack of training	7
	Lack of access and awareness of resources	2
	Peer review is not a widespread practice	1
Lack of confidence and expertise	Lack of confidence	5
	Fear of offending authors	1
	Imposter syndrome	1
	Uncertainty in own expertise	1
Time constraints and workload	Time problems	2

Sub-theme	Codes	*f*
	Workload / competing responsibilities	1
Institutional/structural barriers	Not enough support from managers and colleagues	1
	A mindset that publishing makes someone eligible	1

Participants highlighted several interconnected challenges that prevent ECRs from conducting effective peer reviews. Participants repeatedly noted that inadequate training and a lack of familiarity with the peer review process are the main obstacles hindering ECRs. P5 highlighted that ECRs often encounter difficulties due to *''lack of training, access, and awareness of resources as well as imposter syndrome.''* indicating that structured education on peer review is generally missing in their academic background. Similarly, P2 remarked that most researchers hesitate to get involved in peer reviewing due to an inadequate understanding of the process, stating that *''People do not like peer reviewing and do not want to accept colleagues to their courses. Furthermore, they generally reject suggestions or advice from their colleagues.''* These viewpoints suggest that both unfamiliarity with the review process and the inadequacy of the structured training play a role in the challenges encountered by novice reviewers.

In addition to these educational barriers, the participants highlighted structural and personal constraints, including issues related to inadequate training, confidence, and time pressure. P3 offered a brief and thorough account of the challenges faced, mentioning *"Lack of training, lack of confidence, time problems, workload, unclear expectations from Journals."* P4 expanded on this aspect, highlighting not only the uncertainty in their own expertise but also the challenge of navigating the line between professional conduct and providing criticism in the review process: *"Lack of confidence in their own expertise. Difficulty in balancing constructive criticism with professionalism. Insufficient understanding of the peer review process and journal expectations. Limited time due to competing academic and personal responsibilities."* These responses reveal that the difficulties faced by ECRs are compounded by their individual constraints and the demands of their institutions, which collectively hinder their capacity to participate completely and efficiently in the peer review process.

Participants also pointed out the shortcomings of the process at the institutional level. One of the participants explained that the culture of peer review is not sufficiently established in the academic context, stating, *"Peer review is not a widespread practice across the country, so they might not have a chance to do it or there are not many experienced peers to share their practices."(P1)* P4 underlined the lack of systematic mentorship and guidance, noting, *"Lack of mentorship or guidance. Limited exposure to high-quality research articles. Fear of offending authors with critical feedback. Time constraints and heavy academic workloads."* Participants also highlighted limited managerial support, with one noting, *"Not getting enough support from their managers and colleagues."(P2)* Others mentioned the issue of experiences being too generic, referring to it simply as *"experience."*(P3) Furthermore, they raised concerns about flawed assumptions regarding regarding reviewer qualifications, along with a lack of awareness about available training opportunities. Addressing this issue, P5 illustrated that *"The mindset of believing that anyone who publishes a few papers becomes eligible to do the peer-review. Also, there is a lack of awareness of the actual training programs and tools that might help them in the early stages to learn and polish their skills."* These accounts together indicate that the challenges faced are not only personal but are also deeply rooted in broader institutional and systemic issues. This points to the need for specific support mechanisms to enhance early career researchers' involvement in peer review.

2. Core Competencies and Ethical Principles for High Quality Peer Review

The second research question in this study examined the essential competencies and ethical standards required to conduct high-quality peer reviews. The following table illustrates sub-themes and codes related to these essential competencies and ethical principles for high-quality peer review training.

Table 3. Key competencies and ethical standards for peer review

Sub-theme	Codes	*f*
Disciplinary expertise	subject matter expertise	3
	strong analytical and critical thinking skills	3
	familiarity with research design and methodology	2
	evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript	1
	constructive feedback	4
Ethical awareness	confidentiality of the data	3
	fairness	2
	impartiality	1
	avoiding biases	2
	conflicts of interest	3
	non-discriminatory feedback	1

Participants highlighted the cornerstones of effective reviewing as equipping ECRs with a combination of disciplinary expertise, methodological knowledge, and a strong ethical foundation. P1 emphasized the importance of possessing professional knowledge and providing constructive feedback, noting *"One must know about the teaching profession and ELT methodology ...and must be able to give reflective and constructive feedback."* P2 provided a more comprehensive perspective, stating, *"For conducting a high-quality peer review, a peer reviewer should be knowledgeable, objective, communicative, detail-oriented, timely, professional, and ethical.''* These views indicated that the foundations of high-quality peer reviews depend not only on academic and methodological expertise, but also on core ethical principles.

Other participant statements on the scope of the qualifications also emphasized the importance of methodology and analytical skills. One participant stated, *"Subject matter expertise, ethical issues, familiarity with research methods, willingness to engage in continuous learning."* This view was echoed by P4, who remarked, *"Strong analytical and critical thinking skills. Deep understanding of research design and methodology.''*These insights suggest that effective peer reviewing requires ECRs to possess the ability to assess manuscripts for both their scholarly contribution and methodological rigor.

Key ethical principles, including confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and impartiality, emerged as significant themes.P1 underlined the importance of confidentiality, stating, *"Establishing rapport with peers and confidentiality of the data."* Another participant focused on the notion of academic integrity through core values, noting *"Academic integrity basic values.. honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility."* Likewise, P4 addressed a broad range of ethical responsibilities, saying, *"The importance of confidentiality and impartiality. Avoiding biases, for example, personal, institutional, or cultural. Proper acknowledgment of conflicts of interest. Ensuring constructive and non-discriminatory feedback. Awareness of ethical violations like plagiarism or data falsification."* Finally, P5 reported the need to prioritize ethical principles in a peer review training program for novice researchers in a comprehensive manner, commenting, *"In a peer review training program for novice reviewers, it's crucial to prioritize ethical principles that guide the review process. Emphasizing confidentiality and the responsible handling of sensitive information is essential. Additionally, reviewers should be trained to avoid conflicts of interest and to disclose any potential biases that may affect their objectivity. Integrity, fairness, and respect in communicating feedback are also key ethical values that should be highlighted. Transparency in decision-making and accountability in the review process are essential ethical considerations."*As a result, participants underlined that ethical principles are not a supplementary component but rather a permanent and integral part of the peer review process. Although a strong understanding of the subject and analytical abilities enable ECRs to assess manuscripts thoroughly, maintaining confidentiality, fairness, impartiality, and integrity upholds the credibility and trustworthiness of the process.

3. Suggested Instructional Formats, Resources, and Support Mechanisms

The third research question investigated the kinds of instructional formats, resources, and support mechanisms that are beneficial for ECRs to develop and enhance their peer review capabilities. Table 4 presents the sub-themes and codes related to these effective training formats, relevant resources, and support structures.

Table 4. Recommended training formats, resources and support mechanisms

Sub-theme	Codes	*f*
Preferred training format	blended training format	2
	online	2
	hybrid approach	1
Recommended content and skills	Practical review exercises	2
	statistical information and research design	1
	ethical considerations	3
	similarity reports and AI similarity tools	3
	basics of the peer review process	2
	constructive feedback and critical analysis	2
Use of technology in training	adopting online forms and materials	1
	technology providing the necessary competencies	1
	access to peer review practice platforms	1
	AI tools for writing quality and plagiarism detection	1
	virtual collaboration and mentorship	1
Motivational strategies	improvement in peer review skills	2
	working with good samples	1
	recognition and certification	3
	mentorship and networking	2
	acknowledgement and credit	2

A recurrent theme in the interviews was a preference for blended training approaches that integrate online components with interactive face-to-face sessions. P1 stated, *"Blended would be effective. Participants can watch videos for the theoretical part and gain hands-on skills during face-to-face sessions,"* whereas P3 noted the flexibility of online formats, remarking that *"Online ... video training, will not take participants' time .... and they can join whenever they want."* By contrast, the distinct advantages of in-person education formats were recognized while recommending the blended format, as stated by P5, *"In-person training has its own unique appeal; however, given the diverse learning preferences and needs among researchers, a hybrid approach would be the most effective way to meet everyone's needs."* These statements indicate a strong consensus that blended and flexible models are essential for maximizing participation and optimizing learning outcomes.

Participants also discussed the contents and skills that should be favored in the training. One participant suggested a strong emphasis on the basics, stating, *"Purpose of peer review, techniques and process of observation, analysing the learning environment."* P2 emphasized methodological competence, saying, *"Statistical information and research design and research patterns."* P3

highlighted the importance of ethical principles, noting, *"Ethical considerations, similarity reports, AI Similarity report, etc."* Furthermore, P4 recommended a foundational aspect, noting, *"Basics of the peer review process and its role in academia. Techniques for constructive feedback and critical analysis.Research ethics, including confidentiality and plagiarism detection. Practical exercises in reviewing diverse types of manuscripts. Use of technology tools, for example, plagiarism checkers, reference managers."* These perspectives highlight the importance of integrating fundamental concepts, practical resources, and ethical considerations into the training content.

It was also emphasized that not only format and content, but also technological tools can enhance peer review involvement among ECRs. One participant noted the value of digital resources, stating, *"They can adopt online forms and materials to store data for feedback and research."* And P4 suggested structured training formats and virtual collaboration, recommending, *"Providing access to peer review platforms for practice. Utilizing tools like plagiarism checkers and reference managers to streamline the review process. Enabling collaboration and feedback through virtual forums or mentorship networks."* Finally, P5 underlined how technology plays a crucial role in increasing practicality, noting, *"The first thing is if used appropriately, the technology will aid in reaching reliable structured information. ... Artificial intelligence and search engines are among the technologies that will facilitate this in the first place. But the reviewer will take moral responsibility, not the technology. Technology should be a tool to make the work of both the author and the reviewer easier and faster, not vice versa. ... help save and manage time for early-careers."* From these statements, it is understood that transparent and careful use of technology can strengthen both the efficiency of peer reviewers and the peer review process.

Lastly, participants highlighted that recognition and acknowledgment serve as crucial motivational strategies for ECRs. P1 emphasized the professional development, saying, *"To strongly believe that peer review will make them better teachers and researchers. They will discover many handy tips to better educate their students,"* while other participants focused on continuous learning and experience, noting *"Keep on learning,"* and *"Trying to gain as much experience as possible. Working with the people who can be good samples."* P4 expressed a desire for certification and recognition alongside networking opportunities, commenting, *"Recognition and certification for completed reviews. Opportunities for mentorship and networking with senior academics. Regular feedback from journals on the quality of reviews submitted. Highlighting the value of peer reviewing for professional development."* This view was echoed by P5, who pointed to the value of acknowledgement, stating, *"It's a two-way approach, a proper acknowledgment and credit to their contribution is the only way to keep them engaged productively.''* These insights indicate that fostering motivation and recognition is equally crucial as providing technological and ethical training to maintain the involvement of reviewers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that ECRs face significant challenges in the peer review process due to insufficient training, limited understanding of the procedure, low self-confidence, time constraints, heavy workloads, lack of mentoring, and institutional support. Moreover, participants pointed out that the peer review process is not well established in academic institutions, and there are misconceptions regarding reviewer eligibility. From the perspective of critical pedagogy and ethical decision-making, these findings suggest that ECRs engage in the peer review process under structurally constrained conditions that may hinder opportunities for meaningful learning and fair participation in the dissemination of knowledge production (COPE, 2022; Freire, 1970; Reinhart & Schendzielorz, 2024; Tennant et al., 2017). In reviewing the literature, previous studies report similar patterns in the challenges faced by ECRs. In their research, Jamali (2019), McNair et al. (2019), Sikora (2024), and Buser et al. (2023) also found in their research that ECRs struggled to establish a systematic method for peer reviewing due to a lack of adequate training; consequenlty, they engaged in the process at a surface level and improved their critical reading and feedback abilities only when offered structured materials and direction. Other challenges frequently emphasized by the participants included a lack of self-confidence, inexperience, and insufficient mentoring. These results are in accord with recent studies indicating that ECRs often feel inadequate to undertake peer reviews, and

the lack of guidance and mentoring further complicates the process (Bedeian, 2004; Carroll et al., 2025; El-Guebaly et al., 2022). The findings also revealed that ECRs struggle to sustain peer reviewing due to heavy workload, time pressure, and lack of institutional support. It is encouraging to compare this finding with previous studies, which also reported that peer review is mostly a voluntary process that demands intensive time and effort; however, when adequate incentives and institutional support are not provided, the willingness of ECRs to engage in this process tends to diminish (Bedeian, 2004; Carroll et al., 2025; El-Guebaly et al., 2022). As a result, the findings of this research, along with existing literature, distinctly indicate that the challenges encountered by early-career researchers in the peer review process stem from more than just personal factors; the absence of training, mentoring, motivation, and established standards form a structural barrier.

To conduct an effective peer review process, early-career researchers require not only academic credentials but also robust ethical standards. Participants highlighted the significance of subject matter expertise, as well as strong analytical and critical thinking skills. They also pointed out the value of methodological knowledge, adhering to academic writing standards, engaging in constructive communication, and managing time effectively. These results align with the previous findings, which indicated that methodological knowledge, research competencies, and critical thinking skills are essential for conducting high-quality peer reviews (Kumar & Puranik, 2024; McNair, 2019; Mooney-Somers & Olsen, 2016). Ethical principles emphasized by the participants, such as confidentiality, impartiality, avoiding conflicts of interest, and academic integrity, have also been widely discussed in the literature. Souder (2011) and Weinbaum et al. (2019) identify confidentiality, impartiality, integrity, and fairness as the core values of ethical peer review, whereas McNair (2019) emphasizes that peer review serves not only as scientific evaluation but also as a process for providing constructive and educational feedback. In this context, the aspect of delivering constructive, respectful, and non-discriminatory feedback, reported in the findings, is also regarded as a crucial component of ethical responsibility (McNair, 2019; Souder, 2011; Weinbaum et al., 2019). The concepts of transparency and accountability noted by the participants are also recognized as significant components in the literature. Bravo et al. (2019) emphasize the significance of transparency and accountability in the practices of open peer review, while Souder (2011) identifies accountability as a core principle of the ethical peer review process. Based on these findings and the relevant literature, ECRs need to cultivate both academic skills and ethical principles together to be effective reviewers, and training programs should address both dimensions holistically. Framing peer review as an ethical decision-making process implies that ECRs should learn not only what to evaluate but also how to provide constructive criticism in ways that are transparent, accountable, and educational for authors (COPE, 2022; Souder, 2011; Weinbaum et al., 2019). This is consistent with models of reflective practice in higher education, which view ethical actions as the result of ongoing reflection on one's assumptions, decisions, and feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018; Ryan, 2012; Schön, 1983).

Building on the discussion of challenges and competencies, the results for the third research question of this study indicated that training formats, resources, and support systems play a decisive role in enhancing the reviewing skills of early-career researchers. Participants identified the lack of structured training as the primary challenge, which can only be addressed through standardized programs, acknowledgement, certification, and formal mentoring mechanisms. These results are in line with those of previous studies. Mulligan et al. (2008), Rodríguez-Bravo et al. (2017), Willis et al. (2022), and McDowell et al. (2019) demonstrated that existing peer review practices tend to be largely unstructured and not standardized at the institutional level. Scholars suggest that effective training should feature modular content and incorporate elements of formal recognition and certification. The suggestion for implementing blended or hybrid learning models, as noted in the study, is corroborated by the existing literature. Willis et al. (2023) and Kenny et al. (2024) indicate that interactive workshops and collaborative review practices, supported by online modules, both facilitate the rapid acquisition of reviewing skills and empower ECRs to engage in the process with increased confidence. Another aspect highlighted in the findings is the importance of mentoring and guidance. This is further supported by Kenny et al. (2024) and Rodríguez-Bravo et al. (2017), who assert that supervised evaluations carried out by experienced reviewers facilitate ongoing learning for novice researchers. A recurring theme was the need for acknowledgement, recognition, and certification. Gonzalez et al. (2022), McDowell et al. (2019), Tennant et al. (2017), and Zimba and Gasparyan (2021) argue that increasing the visibility of reviewers' efforts (e.g., via ORCID, Publons, and certification programs)



enhances motivation and fosters sustainable participation. Finally, participants underlined the lack of institutional support and incentives, a concern echoed by Mulligan et al. (2008) and Rodríguez-Bravo et al. (2017). They revealed that without institutional support and infrastructure, even the most thoughtfully designed programs intended for ECRs will have a limited impact. Thus, both the findings of this study and the existing literature clearly demonstrate that a comprehensive approach is essential for advancing the peer review competencies of early career researchers. In line with the reflective practice standpoint adopted in this study, such a comprehensive approach is likely to be most effective when training programs give ECRs repeated opportunities to practice reviewing, receive feedback on their own reports, and reflect in a structured way on the ethical and pedagogical aspects of their decisions (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018; Schön, 1983). From a critical pedagogical perspective, different forms of formal recognition and institutional support indicate that the reviewer development is a valued academic work rather than an invisible service, so it helps address the motivational challenges and workload barriers identified in the findings (Freire, 1970; Tennant et al., 2017). The needs analysis results reported in this research guide suggest such designs by indicating which competencies, type of support, and incentives ECRs and experts consider most important in foreign language education.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study addresses an important gap by identifying the multidimensional barriers and requirements that shape the involvement of ECRs in the peer review process in foreign language education. The results highlight both individual shortcomings and broader institutional problems. Lack of training, mentoring, and ethical awareness, as well as time pressure and limited managerial support, were identified as the main factors hindering effective participation in the peer review process. Accordingly, the study shows that challenges faced by ECRs should be addressed not only at the personal level but also through systematic and institutional efforts.

A number of implications can be drawn from the study, including the integration of the peer review training into graduate programs, designing structured hybrid training models, enhancing mentorship-based practices, and establishing recognition and certification systems to value peer reviewers' efforts. Such policies will not only improve the quality of peer review but also help sustain the process by supporting and motivating early-career researchers. Furthermore, incorporating ethical standards such as confidentiality, impartiality, respect, and transparency will strengthen the credibility of the peer review process and contribute to the integrity of scholarly communication. For research workers and teacher educators who supervise master's and doctoral students or other early-career researchers in foreign language education, these findings suggest that peer review should be treated as a fundamental part of research training rather than an optional, informal activity. Integrating structured reviewing tasks into postgraduate research methods courses, together with feedback on novice reviewers' own review reports and guided reflection on ethical and methodological issues, can help ECRs develop the confidence and judgement needed to act as effective reviewers. For stakeholders in scholarly publishing, such as journal editors, publishers, and professional associations, the results highlight the importance of developing peer review training and mentoring programs that are aligned with the competence areas identified in this needs analysis. Making reviewers‘ contributions visible by establishing recognition and certification systems, and providing institutional time and resources for reviewer development, are central to strengthening review quality and sustaining ECR involvement.

Despite these promising results, further research is suggested to explore scalable and discipline-sensitive training models. Investigating the long-term effects of recognition and certification systems on reviewer involvement and review quality, along with cross-disciplinary comparisons, will bring new perspectives to the field. Therefore, peer review can be recognized as a valued and formative component of academic development rather than a worrying burden. In this sense, the needs analysis framework developed in the present study can provide a starting point for comparative research on how different training models shape ECRs' reviewing practices across programmes, institutions, and disciplines.

This study has potential limitations. Since the study was limited to a relatively small number of participants and relied on only qualitative data, these findings are less generalizable. Another limitation of this study is that the data were collected in the Turkish context, which may limit



transferability to other cultural and disciplinary settings. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides an important guideline for future studies with larger samples and mixed-method designs.

Ethical Statement: This research has been conducted in compliance with the institutional regulations of the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, as outlined in the ethical approval document (Decision No: 16/12) dated 14 November 2024.

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