Medical Researchers React to Peer Review: Attitudes towards and Challenges of Iranian Surgeons Publishing in English

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Abstract

Despite the recent growth of attention to English for research publication purposes, little is known about how researchers view the role of peer review in their success of publication. In light of this gap, the present study investigated Iranian surgeons' attitudes towards peer review and the challenges they face in getting their papers published. To this end, 26 Iranian surgeons were interviewed, and the transcribed data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The results revealed that firstly the surgeons attested to the positive and negative contributions of peer review in terms of changing or unchanging their attitudes, respectively. Secondly, the authors faced a myriad of challenges related to editors, reviewers, and socio-political-linguistic factors in getting their papers published. Moreover, they associated these challenges with positive and negative effects in being connected to their career-stage development and motivating them to conduct and submit more papers. The study concludes with implications for research and practice in how researchers can craft more quality papers to enhance their chance of publication in high-quality journals.

Keywords: *Attitude, English, English for Research Publication Purposes, ERPP, Peer Review*

Introduction

Over the past decades, English for research publication purposes (ERPP) has turned into an active agenda to which different researchers attend because it directly influences the academic and social life of practitioners and researchers (see Flowerdew, 2015; Li & Flowerdew, 2020). The central argument of this line of thinking is that academicians conduct research due to multiple personal, professional, and social reasons, and these

issues influence their remuneration, job seeking, and promotion (Flowerdew, 2022; Flowerdew & Habibie, 2021; Habibie & Flowerdew, 2023; Li, Flowerdew, & Cargill, 2018). As McKinley and Rose (2018) note, a large part of this line of inquiry relates to the venues in which academicians publish their papers, their perceptions and challenges, and navigating the editorial process. Among the various issues related to this emerging field, the current study focuses on the role of peer review among higher education researchers.

Peer review has been defined in numerous yet similar ways by scholars. Stricker (1982) defined peer review as "a process by which one professional, in an official capacity, makes a judgment about a co-professional in a matter involving professional functioning" (p. 1). Gerwing et al. (2020) also explained that the aims of peer review are not just to ensure the credibility of scientific papers but also to show the weaknesses of the papers, offer constructive feedback as to how to improve scientific papers, and make sure that the published content is not misleading science (p. 1).

Peer review is indispensable to the publication of scientific research, points to a number of reasons for this importance. To start with, peer review is a quality-control procedure in a way that high-profile journals usually have stricter peer review processes to better ensure the quality of submitted papers (Hyland & Jiang, 2020). Furthermore, peer reviews are a way of checking the credibility of scientific claims (Gerwing et al., 2020; Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Mulligan et al., 2013). As Mulligan et al. (2013) maintained, peer review is "the most effective mechanism for ensuring the reliability, integrity, and consistency of the scholarly literature" (p. 149). In the same line, Hyland and Jiang (2020) maintained that "peer review contributes to universalism, or an adherence to objectivity rather than personal self-interest, and to organised scepticism, so that no theory is accepted merely on the authority of the proponent" (p. 2). From another perspective, peer reviews can influence researchers' careers (Hyland & Jiang, 2020). Last but not least, peer reviews can act as a mentoring tool (Kwan, 2013) to instruct authors, especially novices.

Peer reviews, however, may be problematic for researchers, particularly non-native researchers. Researchers may find harsh peer reviews emotionally disturbing (Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Kwan, 2013), and they may see peer reviews as barriers to getting their papers published. In fact, novice researchers may feel shocked by the first reviews of their first papers in a way that they may lose their confidence in conducting research and writing scholarly papers (Kwan, 2013; Oermann & Hays, 2011). As Hyland and Jiang (2020) also mentioned, harsh criticism or contemptuous comments demoralize authors' self-confidence in conducting research. Perceptions about peer review is the major point highlighted by Hyland and Jiang (2020) in one of the single empirical studies of this research line, a point also emphasized by Kwan (2013).

Although the scope of research on English for academic and research publication purposes has significantly grown over the past decades and peer review has long been discussed as a stage associated with various challenges (Habibie & Flowerdew, 2023; Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Li & Flowerdew, 2020; McKinley & Rose, 2018; Pickering & Byrne, 2014), little is known about how authors view the peer review process, the challenges they face across this process, and more importantly how such challenges influence their research motivations. This line of inquiry merits attention as it provides implications for academic researchers to become more familiar with the range of issues

and challenges that they face in the publication process and how they could actively deal with the challenges to enhance their motivation. In light of this argument, the current study explores a group of Iranian higher education instructors' (here surgeons) attitudes towards and challenges of peer review, and the effect it exerts on their motivation in research conduction and submission.

Literature Review

As far as understanding peer reviews is concerned, authors, especially novices, may perceive reviewers' comments in particular ways. For example, authors who are not native English speakers may think that the most important problem with their papers are language problems (Ferguson et al., 2011; Hanauer & Englander, 2011; Hwang, 2005). However, Ferguson et al. (2011) stated that language problems are not limited to nonnative speakers of English, because even native English speakers may have difficulty expressing themselves in academic prose. As Swales (2004) noted, writing in professional academic discourse has more to do with the experience of the authors than with their native or nonnative status. Because of a lack of writing and research experience, novice authors may, then, perceive it more that peer review comments indicate that they lack the necessary linguistic and research competence to write academic or scientific papers.

Peer reviews also have an important emotional aspect. On the one hand, the harshness of comments may be under the influence of reviewers' emotional state (Tennant & Ross-Hellauer, 2020). On the other hand, the reviews themselves can be emotionally disheartening for authors (Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Kwan, 2013; Oermann & Hays, 2011), especially for novice researchers (Kwan, 2013). One way to explore the cognitive and emotional aspects of peer reviews can be an investigation of the evaluative criteria that scholars think that reviewers may use in commenting on their papers.

Concerning the evaluative foci of peer reviews, it seems that there are a number of commonalities among such foci. For example, most reviews seem to focus on the content of the papers (Coniam, 2012; Dueñas, 2012; Mungra & Webber, 2010), credibility or acceptability of claims (Coniam, 2012; Gerwing et al., 2020; Hewings, 2004; Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Mulligan et al., 2013), and the quality of the language in terms of grammar and conventional norms of writing (Dueñas, 2012; Hewings, 2004).

Hyland and Jiang (2020) analyzed 850 online-posted comments written by authors concerning reviewers' comment. They grouped reviewers' comments into five broad categories. The first one is author competence, which refers to the authors' skill in conducting research. Overall verdict refers to an overall impression of whether a paper is worth publishing, which includes some sub-categories such as whether a study is novel enough, sufficiently contributes to its related literature, and whether it adheres to journal standards. The third group of criticisms is directed at the quality of the arguments, which focuses on the acceptability and persuasiveness of the claims as well as paragraph coherence. The fourth is structure and language, which refers to how neat and appropriate the grammar of a paper is, whether the paper adheres to the conventions of academic writing, and whether it is of appropriate length. Finally, research design refers to the soundness of research questions, the nature of data, the procedure of conducting the research, and the appropriateness of data analysis. Presenting their results in percentage

forms, Hyland and Jiang (2020) reported that most comments were about the overall verdict (29.9 %), followed by author competence (24.5%), research design (21.5%), quality of the arguments (12.8%), and structure and language (11.3%).

Regardless of how much weight reviewers may give to different aspects of scholarly papers, authors' perceptions of the weight of the problems may be different, creating a number of challenges for them. For example, authors, especially non-native speakers of English, may feel that their most important problem is a lack of sufficient linguistic proficiency to write acceptable academic papers. In other words, although in Hyland and Jiang's (2020) study reviewers commented least on structure and language (11.3%), authors may think differently, attributing the rejection of their papers to structure and language. Ferguson et al. (2011), for example, found that the majority of their participants strongly agreed that native speakers of English have a linguistic advantage over nonnative speakers regarding academic publication. In another study, Hanauer and Englander (2011) realized that Mexican scientists found writing in English 24% more difficult, and produced 11% more dissatisfaction and 21% more anxiety, concluding that as far as writing academic papers is concerned, writing in English is an extra burden for nonnative speakers of English.

Another set of problems that authors may perceive as a barrier in publishing their papers can be emotional problems. Being criticized is inherently disturbing. As mentioned before, peer reviews may cause authors to lose their self-confidence (Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Kwan, 2013; Oermann & Hays, 2011). Cameron et al. (2009) mentioned self-doubt as a common emotion experienced by novice researchers, and Aitchison et al. (2012) called academic publishing a kind of emotional task, which may cause authors to experience both joy and pain. Mertkan (2016) also maintained that compared to established researchers, novices may experience stronger negative emotions especially because they are not familiar with the fact that harsh criticism is normal in peer reviews.

Strong negative emotions, then, may have some influence on authors' motivation to pursue their careers in academia, at least as far as publishing scholarly papers is concerned. Few studies, if any, have addressed this issue as far as peer review is concerned. A number of studies have investigated reviewers' motivation for peer reviewing (see, for example, Street & Ward, 2019; see also Mahmić-Kaknjo et al., 2021, for a scoping review of this). Some studies have addressed authors' general motivation to publish papers (see Ibrahim et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2011; Street & Ward, 2019), the results of most of which show that scientists' main motivation for publishing scientific papers is to advance in their careers (Ibrahim et al., 2022). However, little research has explored the influence of peer reviews on authors' motivation to conduct further research and publish more scholarly papers. This is an under-researched area of investigation that needs to be addressed and is investigated in this study. In particular, due to (1) the growing interest in exploring different dimensions of ERPP, (2) the importance of peer review in academicians' professional development and promotion, and (3) the linguistic injustices associated with L2 writers' publication success (e.g., McKinley & Rose, 2018; Zhang & Hyland, 2022), here Iranian researchers, the present study can offer helpful contributions for different stakeholders. Thus, the study also aimed to explore Iranian surgeons' attitudes towards and challenges of peer review, and its effects on their research motivation. The reason for

selecting surgeons for the purposes of this study is that, as Hylad and Jiang (2020) argue, academicians of hard sciences face a myriad of challenges in getting their papers published due to methodological, conceptual, and linguistic issues, yet how these issues influence their attitudes and motivations is under-researched. The study addressed the following questions:

RQ1: What are Iranian surgeons' attitudes towards peer reviews of their scholarly papers?

RQ2: What are the main evaluative foci of peer reviews of Iranian surgeons' scholarly papers as seen by the authors themselves?

RQ3: What challenges do Iranian surgeons face in addressing peer reviews of their scholarly papers and getting their papers published?

RQ4: How do peer reviews influence Iranian surgeons' motivation for publishing more scholarly papers?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 26 Iranian surgeons (23 males, 3 females, mean age 48), who were faculty members of the Department of Surgery at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences in Iran. The participants' mean duration of employment in the academia was 13.08 years (median 10.5 years). The distribution of academic rank was the following: full professor (5; 19.23%), associate professor (9; 34.62%), and assistant professor (12; 46.15%). For all surgeons analyzed, the mean h-index was 5.92 (median 4; range, 1–15). The mean number of papers published in the accredited journals was 21.7 (median 13; range, 2-74). It is to be noted that publications in journals with the Scopus, PubMed, and Journal Citation Reports (JCR) indexes were counted as publications in the accredited journals. The participants were all native speakers of Persian who had learned English as a foreign language with no background of education in Western Universities. The participants were also selected by means of purposeful (i.e., only surgeons) and convenience (i.e., only the available ones) sampling methods because they showed willingness to participate in the study.

Procedure

The study was approved by the ethics committee of Kharazmi University (IR.KHU.REC.140.003). After selecting the participants of the study, the researchers informed them that the data of the study will be used only for research purposes and that the participants will remain anonymous. After obtaining the participants' verbal consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded, they were interviewed face to face and in person. They were asked some main questions and follow-up questions that were identical in all the interviews (see the Appendix 1). They were all interviewed in their mother tongue, Persian, so that they could talk without any language barriers. The interviews were recorded by two digital devices to make sure that the data are not lost for technical problems. Each interview took about 15 minutes, and the interviewees' talks were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were about 400 to 500 words long, which were then analyzed through thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were imported to MAXQDA software version 10. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which began with open coding the data. This was followed, if needed, by axial and selective coding (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990), which generated a number of themes. Any particular comment that was repeated by at least two participants was considered a code (Braun & Clarke, 2012). All the thematic analysis was done by the researchers themselves. After an initial briefing session, the researchers coded the data individually so that their codes could be compared, the results of which showed that the phi-coefficient index of agreement was .92. The analysis of the transcriptions in relation to the first research question produced two themes. For the second, third, and fourth research questions, five, 10, and two themes emerged, respectively. The next section elaborates on the results of thematic analysis.

Results

The first research question addressed Iranian surgeons' attitudes towards peer reviews of their scholarly papers. The follow-up question also explored whether these surgeons' attitudes towards academic publication and peer review processes changed during their professional careers. In light of this point, three codes were identified in open coding of the data, one of which generated the theme unchanged attitudes and two of which generated the theme changed attitudes. The results, including some excerpts of interviewees' words, have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Iranian Surgeons' Attitudes towards Peer Reviews of their Scholarly Papers

Theme	Open Coding	Excerpts
Unchanged Attitudes [12]	Positive [12]	It has been positive so far [9]
		It has been positive so far with not much change [3]
Changed Attitudes [14]	Change for the better [12]	It has become more positive over time [8]
		It was negative, then it became positive [4]
	Change for the worse [2]	It was more positive, but not so much positive recently [2]

Note. Numbers in brackets refer to the frequency of the occurrence of the comments made by the participants.

As can be seen in Table 1, 12 comments were made by the participants, showing that their attitudes towards peer review did not change much or at all. In this regard, most of the comments (nine ones) showed that the attitudes have been positive, and the remaining comments (three ones) for this theme also showed that the attitudes have been positive without much change. In contrast, the participants made 14 comments that showed their attitudes have changed. Eight such comments were about a more positive attitude over time, and four comments were about a complete change from a negative attitude to a positive one. However, two comments showed a slightly deteriorated attitude to peer reviews.

The next research question was about the evaluative foci of peer reviews. The results and the relevant excerpts translated into English can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Iranian Surgeons' Perceptions of the Evaluative Foci of Peer Reviews

Theme	Open Coding	Excerpts
Research Design [57]	Data Analysis [23]	..., but most of the criticism is on methods of analysis and reporting the analysis of data.
	Research Design [21]	Abundantly on research design. Different dimensions of study design.
	Methods [10]	They ask more explanations about the method.
	Ethics [3]	Then the ethical aspects of the research is emphasized.
Overall Verdict [56]	Overall Verdict [17]	Overall verdict is one of the factors of early rejection, but if the work has a good message and the overall work is good, they will accept it with some revision, otherwise they reject it.
	Novelty of the Topic [20]	Most of all, whether the work is new or not.
	Editors' interest [9]	Even if it is valuable, does it solve their problems or not?
	Gap in Knowledge [5]	Its applicability. To answer a question.
	Applicability [5]	Largely on its applicability, the novelty, and the other on the structure of the article.
Language Issues [34]	Grammar [20]	Grammatical mistakes such as improper use of tenses and subject and verb disagreement.
	Making oneself understood [14]	Now, I'm able to write articles in such a way that someone who reads it will understand what I mean.
Quality of the Arguments [18]	Insufficient citations [8]	And they usually say that the discussion is not complete, few relevant articles have been included in the discussion.
	Misrepresenting other authors' arguments [7]	The research you mentioned did not say that, you mentioned something different.
	Underdeveloped discussion [3]	..., why you didn't talk about them in the discussion.
Author Competence [12]	Lack of trust in the surgeons' ability to have many operations [9]	A journal asked us "did you really have this many operations? ... Did you perform this procedure? They are always in doubt.
	Lack of trust in the surgeons' research competence [3]	They recommended or suggested that we should have consulted a methodologist.

Note. Numbers in brackets refer to the frequency of the occurrence of the comments made by the participants.

As can be seen in Table 2, five themes emerged in relation to the evaluative foci of the peer reviews. In two cases, one code among related codes was promoted to a theme because the other codes in that section were assumed to be influenced by this code. The first code that was also considered a theme was research design, because the other codes in this section, namely method, data analysis, and ethics, were considered as parts that were influenced by research design. In this regard, the participants mentioned 21 comments in peer reviews as directly questioning the research design of their papers. Concerning data analysis, methods, and ethics, 23, 10, and three comments were identified, respectively. Together, in peer reviews, 57 comments were directed to the research design, as understood by the participants.

The other code that was promoted to a theme was the overall verdict, with 17 pertinent comments. The names of this theme and some of its related codes were taken from Hyland

and Jiang's (2020) study. Related codes in this section, namely the novelty of the topic with 20 comments, editors' interest in the topic of the research with nine comments, gap in knowledge with five comments, and applicability of research also with 5 comments were considered as codes that could influence the overall impression that editors and reviewers may get of the papers, and so they were considered as part of the theme the overall verdict. It should be noted that by editors' interest, the participants meant if editors thought that the submitted manuscripts were of value in the context where editors lived.

Regarding authors' competence, nine comments questioned the authors' ability and competence to perform many operations. The authors believed that the reviewers directly questioned their surgical competence, their surgical techniques, and the results they came to by their techniques even to the point of accusing surgeons of lying about the number of their surgical operations and techniques. The other related code was a lack of trust in the surgeons' research competence. In this regard, the participants believed that the reviewers questioned authors' competence in conducting research because, for example, the reviewers had asked them to consult a methodologist.

A closely-related theme to the previous one was the quality of the arguments. In this regard, the authors understood 18 comments as questioning the quality of the arguments authors put forward. The related codes revealed that supporting claims with few and insufficient citations (with eight comments), misrepresenting what other authors maintained in their papers (with seven comments), and underdeveloped discussion (with three comments) were the main reasons why the reviewers believed that authors' arguments were of low quality.

The last theme generated in relation to evaluative criteria was language issues, with 20 comments about the accuracy of the grammar of the papers and 14 comments about the authors' ability to make themselves understood. As long as grammar is concerned, a lack of dominance over verbs and subject-verb agreement was highlighted by the reviewers. Moreover, the participants felt that sometimes the reviewers could not understand them. Lack of error-free grammar and difficulty in making oneself understood, then, formed the last focus of reviewers' comments.

All the above-mentioned five themes may create a number of challenges for the participants of the study, among other difficulties. In the following section, the participants' challenges in dealing with peer reviews and getting their papers published have been presented, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Iranian Surgeons' Challenges in Dealing with Peer Reviews and Getting their Papers Published

Theme	Axial Coding	Open Coding	Excerpts
Dealing with Unprofessional Comments [63]	Negative [49]	Biased and unfair [36]	They said that ... 'there are many articles on this topic'; and two months later I saw that they published an article on the same topic by English or American authors.
		Harsh and offensive [10]	S/he said in a way that 'Is it possible?' or 'What are your documents?'
		Discouraging [3]	In domestic English Journals (of course with limited number), ... comments were disappointing, for example, 'the work is not valuable'...
		Vague [8]	... after three times I understood what they meant.
	Power-related [14]	Abuse of peer review [3]	Asked us to cite their own or journal's article(s).
		Stance [3]	In national journals, you can see more instances of stance. Less in foreign journals, but more in internal ones.
Dealing with Editors' Decisions on the Manuscripts [36]	Multiple revisions [9]	Lengthy and tiresome processes [5]	... better than four times for minor revision. It is a long and tedious process.
		Uncertain of the final decision [4]	They asked us three times to revise the manuscript, but it was rejected after these revisions.
	Rejection with no justifiable reasons [23]	Repetitious topic [10]	For case reports, it frequently occurs that they say 'we have limitation to publish case reports'.
		Not related to the scope of the journal [9]	... that this does not fit the scope of our journal.
		Editorial office rejection with no reason [4]	Rejection with no comments means they passed by it indifferently. In 50%, they reject with comments.
	Major revisions [4]	Major revision [4]	As soon as they ask for major revisions, I abandon the attempt. ..., so I try another journal.
Handling Peer Review Duration [36]	Long waits for international journals [30]	No news of the paper was initiated by the editors [5]	In a case, we received no news from the journal within three months.
		A roughly 3-month wait for the first news [25]	After three or four months, they don't send the decision letter, so we send an email.
	Longer waits for domestic journals [6]	A roughly 5-month wait for the first news [3]	There is a significant difference between domestic and foreign journals regarding duration of peer-review.
		Having to contact editors by telephone [3]	... you have to follow up on almost all cases by phone, but foreign ones usually respond in a reasonable time.
Language Issues [25]		Having error-free grammar [15]	We always have problem in terms of language, but it is not a major concern ...
		Making oneself understood [10]	Sometimes our language is not fluent enough that makes it so difficult to be understood.

Strict Standards of Journals for Publication [26]	Strict Standards of National Journals for Publication [16]	Professionality of the reviewers and editors [10]	They do it perfunctorily. In national journals, you can see more instances of stance.
		Being a novice authors [6]	Mostly they publish articles from ... authors with whom they are familiar.
	Strict Standards of International Journals for Publication [10]	Professionality of the reviewers and editors [6]	We found many articles similar or even lower in quality than ours that they published.
		Being a novice authors [4]	Being a key figure is of importance.
Political Factors [14]		Rejection because of political sanction [14]	Only one journal clearly stated that 'we cannot publish your article due to sanctions'.
Social Factors [10]		Familiarity with the authors [6]	... familiarity with the editors, editorial board members of journals, and the referees is a key factor.
		Familiarity with the authors' affiliations [4]	Several times, I've seen published papers in reputable journals which are not so novel, but they are accepted simply because the work has been done in a distinguished center with a larger database.
Framing Response [10]		Authors' difficulty to respond to reviewers due to limited linguistic proficiency [5]	We have difficulty more in illumination of the subject matter.
		Authors' difficulty to respond to reviewers due to limited research proficiency [5]	The next challenge is scientific one, in how to respond to the raised comments.
Research Collaboration [9]		Absence of a competent research team [3]	There are very few colleagues who have enough research competency to collaborate with.
		Incompetence in statistical analysis [3]	Conducting statistical analysis is difficult for us and we cannot easily find coauthors who are familiar with it.
		Lack of effective collaboration among all authors [3]	There was usually a lack of effective collaboration among authors in the sense of dividing the work share ...
Selecting the Right Journal [9]		Journal Index [3]	... we have to publish in top-ranked journals because of institutional policies underlying academic promotions.
		Peer Review Duration [3]	Selecting the right journal ... . and how long the peer review process takes.
		Strict Standards of Journals for Publication [3]	Selecting the right journal ... . to know principles of peer review as performed by the reviewers in that journal.

As can be seen in Table 3, 10 themes emerged in relation to the third research question, which was formulated to investigate the challenges that Iranian surgeons face in dealing with peer reviews of their scholarly papers and getting their papers published.

The first theme or challenge was dealing with unprofessional comments. In this regard, there were 63 comments in open coding, which were grouped into two categories in axial coding, namely negative comments in 49 cases and power-related comments in 14 cases. In 49 cases, the comments were perceived by the participants as negative. More specifically, in 36 comments, the participants perceived the reviewers' comments as

biased and unfair. In 10 cases, they found harsh and offensive comments, and in three ones they were emotionally discouraging.

In 14 cases, the participants felt that the reviewers took advantage of their power. This is so because the participants felt that the reviewers did not bother to clearly explain their points (in eight cases). This vagueness was considered as abusing power because the participants thought that reviewers felt superior to the authors and in a position of power, and so the reviewers did not have to fully explain what they mean, creating intentional or unintentional vagueness for authors. Moreover, the participants felt that reviewers abused their power by asking the authors to cite the reviewers' works or other papers published in the same journal where the surgeons' manuscripts were being reviewed (in three cases). The participants also felt that the reviewers exerted their power by imposing their stance, that is to say, their position in relation to some points (in three cases). Overall, then, one of the challenges of the participants in relation to peer reviews was dealing with unprofessional comments.

The next challenge that Iranian surgeons had to face in peer reviews was dealing with the decisions that were made about their manuscripts. In this regard, three codes emerged in axial coding, namely multiple revisions, rejection with no justifiable reasons, and major revisions, with nine, 23, and four codes, respectively (for the related open coding see Table 3). Overall, 36 reviewers' comments were understood by the participants as being related to decisions that were made about their papers, and handling such decisions was a challenge for the participants.

The next theme or challenge was tolerating the peer review duration, which is usually a long and cumbersome process. In this regard, the participants mentioned that after the submission of their papers, they usually had to wait for a long time to be contacted by the editors, which was about three months for international journals and five months for domestic journals. The participants mentioned that sometimes they had to get some news of their papers because they were not contacted by the editors even after three or four months. The participants found domestic editors less responsible for their work and less responsive to the authors to the point that sometimes participants had to telephone the journals to follow up on their papers.

The next challenge pertained to language issues. Among the comments made by the reviewers, in 25 cases the participants understood them as related to the authors' linguistic limitations. In 15 cases, the participants admitted that having error-free grammar is very challenging for them and regardless of how much grammar they study, they are still not linguistically proficient enough to write in an error-free manner. They also mentioned, in 10 cases, that sometimes it is difficult for them to make themselves understood. Overall, then, language issues were considered by the participants as a challenge of dealing with peer reviews but not a major concern.

Another challenge was dealing with the strict standards of journals for publication. In this regard, two codes emerged for both national and international journals. The first code was the professionality of the reviewers and editors. Some of the participants accused the reviewers of national journals of not reading the papers well or at all and imposing their views on the authors. The participants also felt that international journals can have their own bias because they publish some similar and even less-developed studies compared to

the papers written by the participants. These comments were closely related to the second code, that is, authors' fame. The participants believed that although papers usually go through blind peer reviews, the identity of the authors is still known to the editors, who may not be willing to publish the papers of novice researchers or even experienced researchers who are not famous.

Political factors emerged as the next theme. It was believed by the participants that sometimes their papers got rejected only because Iran was (and still is) under political sanctions. In many cases, this was just the participants' perception and feelings, without any clear evidence for it. However, one of the participants mentioned that "an international journal frankly told us that they cannot publish our paper because Iran is under political sanctions. I appreciate their honesty". Thus, dealing with the rightly or wrongly perceived stigma attached to Iran as far as political sanctions are concerned was another challenge that the participants had to face in the submission and peer reviews of their papers.

Another difficulty that the authors felt they have was social factors. In this regard, two codes emerged, namely familiarity with the authors and familiarity with the authors' affiliations. In six comments, the participants mentioned that if the editors and reviewers know the authors in person, they will publish submitted papers more willingly. In four cases, the participants believed that knowing the authors' affiliation would have such an effect. In this regard, they believed that what the participants mentioned was related to the social relationships between the authors (and their affiliations) and the editors and reviewers.

The next challenge that the participants had in dealing with peer reviews was framing their own responses to the reviewers' comments. In other words, the participants sometimes did not know how to address reviewers' comments. Part of this difficulty was related to linguistic limitations (in five cases) and part of it was researchers' insufficient research knowledge (in five cases) as admitted by themselves.

Another challenge was developing collaboration among authors. Some of the participants mentioned that there are very few colleagues who have enough research competency to collaborate with. They also mentioned that conducting statistical analyses is difficult for them and they cannot easily find coauthors who are familiar with it. They usually have to resort to statisticians, which can be costly for the authors. Moreover, even after forming a research team, there was usually a lack of effective collaboration among authors in the sense of dividing the work share that needed to be done individually.

The last challenge mentioned by the participants was selecting the right journal for submitting their papers. Two of the previous themes, namely peer review duration and the strict standards of journals for publication turned out to be codes for this theme, each with three comments. Journal index was also a determining factor as the participants would check to see if a journal is either a Scopus-, PubMed-, or a JCR-indexed one.

Overall, then, the participants mentioned 10 challenges that they had in relation to peer reviews and getting their papers published. To enumerate them, the challenges were dealing with unprofessional comments, dealing with editors' decisions on the papers, handling the duration of peer review, language issues, strict standards of journals for publication, political factors, social factors, framing response, research collaboration, and selecting the right journal. These challenges and the experience of peer reviews may

influence authors' motivation to conduct more research and submit more papers. In what follows this was investigated, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

The Influence of Peer Reviews on Iranian Surgeons' Motivation to Publish

Theme	Open Coding	Excerpts
No changes in motivation [20]	No negative effect [18]	No. It has had no negative effect.
	No significant negative effect [2]	With not much influence on me. Its negative impact has not been so much significant.
Changes in motivation [6]	Earlier, it had a negative effect, but not now [3]	Some years earlier, it had a negative effect, but not now.
	Positive effect [3]	It has had a positive effect.

Note. Numbers in brackets refer to the number of participants who mentioned a particular comment.

The last research question investigated the effect of peer review on the participants' motivation for publishing more scholarly papers. As can be seen in Table 4, 20 participants mentioned that their motivation was not negatively influenced by peer reviews, and six participants mentioned that peer review somehow influenced their motivation. Three of them said that peer reviews initially reduced their motivation for publication but now they are used to it, and three participants maintained that their motivation had increased because of peer reviews. This is so because they could learn much about research by reading reviewers' comments.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the results revealed that the comments which were indicative of no changes in attitudes showed that most of the unchanged attitudes were positive, and that most of the changed attitudes somehow were negative at first. This may suggest that positive attitudes may be less susceptible to change than negative attitudes, meaning that it may be easier to change a negative attitude. Clearly, this is just speculation, and further especially large-scale studies are needed to verify such a conjecture. However, this finding aligns with Flowerdew's (2015) argument that researchers need time to become immune to the chronicle effects of navigating the publication procedure and then change their attitudes towards the process of paper submission and also towards the scholarly venues.

Concerning the second research question, which explored the main evaluative foci of peer reviews, it turned out that research design (with 57 comments) and overall verdict (with 56 comments) were the most frequently mentioned issues. This may suggest that sections related to research design and the overall impression that reviewers get of a paper (see Hyland & Jiang, 2020) are the most important evaluative criteria for reviewers, in which case it can be important for authors to pay more attention to these sections and make themselves well-versed. This finding may be interpreted in light of Zhang and Hyland's (2022) contention that journals treat papers on the basis of disciplinary parameters, and since surgery is an area in which research procedure and methodology matter more than linguistic issues, the participants of this study highlighted these two dimensions more focally.

Another code that was generated in relation to the second research question was author

competence. It was shown that the participants understood more comments as questioning their competence in performing operations. This can be a matter of trust in what authors say, further questioning the integrity of authors. This point can be discouraging and disheartening for authors (Kwan, 2013; Oermann & Hays, 2011), and if authors are not trusted enough, they may lose their willingness to conduct more research and write more scholarly papers (Kwan, 2013). Another aspect of this theme was implying that the participants did not have enough research competence to conduct research. Such implications can be drawn from the fact that in three cases, the reviewers had asked the authors to consult some research methodologists. It is hard to say whether questioning authors' research competence was fair or not because one needs access to the authors' papers and reviewers' comments. What may matter more is authors' perceptions of these comments because such comments may cognitively and emotionally influence authors.

The next theme that was generated in relation to the second research question was the quality of the arguments. As mentioned earlier, the reviewers believed that authors' claims and arguments were weak because of three problems, namely insufficient reference to literature, misunderstanding and misrepresenting what other authors did and said in their papers, and short and underdeveloped discussion sections. These results are in line with the results of Hyland and Jiang's (2020) study, which showed that the quality of the arguments was one of the main evaluative foci. Furthermore, Flowerdew and Habibie (2021) emphatically noted that being able to craft quality and convincing arguments are one of the best ways to succeed in the publication process and suggested that authors devote a great deal of their time to this issue.

The importance of the quality of the arguments demands addressing. In this regard, weaknesses in formulating an argument seem to be rectifiable. For example, authors can read more literature to compensate for insufficient references and can practice more academic writing to master the skill of supporting ideas. This way, they may get fewer negative comments from reviewers, at least as far as the quality of their arguments is concerned (Hewings, 2004).

The last theme concerning evaluative foci was language issues. As mentioned earlier, the reviewers' comments highlighted that the grammar of papers was not neat and error-free, and that sometimes the reviewers could not understand what the authors meant, suggesting that the authors had difficulty in making themselves understood. Language issues were also reported by Hewings (2004) and Dueñas (2012) as the problems that are frequently highlighted by reviewers. However, contrary to Belcher (2007) and Coniam (2012) who did not find language issues as a decisive factor in rejecting papers, the participants of this study felt that language issues were one of the main evaluative foci. This is probably because the convention of academic writing requires neat and error-free grammar, and some reviewers may be quite uncompromising about high standards in grammar and language. It can be an interesting area of investigation to see how much grammar and language issues matter to reviewers from the reviewers' standpoint, as contrasted to authors' standpoint. Moreover, McKinley and Rose (2018) discussed how some journals marginalize non-native authors by promoting the dialectical superiority of American or British standards and this issue should be dealt with. It seems that the participants of this study also faced a similar problem, which adds to McKinley and Rose's

discussion in the area of surgery.

All in all, the participants of this study believed that their papers have been evaluated based on five main criteria, namely research design, overall verdict, authors' competence, quality of the arguments, and language issues. These evaluative foci, among other difficulties, may also be seen as some challenges.

As mentioned earlier, the third research question was formed to investigate Iranian surgeons' challenges in dealing with peer reviews of their papers and getting their papers published. It was also mentioned that 10 challenges were identified in this regard.

The first challenge was dealing with reviewers' unprofessional comments. In 36 comments, the participants accused the reviewers of being biased and unfair. They found 10 comments harsh and offensive, and three comments emotionally discouraging. As far as biased and unfair comments are concerned, the authors may not be able to do anything about them as these comments are totally related to the reviewers and editors. For example, one of the participants maintained that he had submitted a paper to an international journal. The journal editor told him that the topic of the paper is of no interest to them. However, the same topic was published by the same journal when the author was an English native speaker. If one can consider everything else equal, such as the quality of the paper and methodology and so on, the participants may be right in thinking that publishing a paper because the author is an English native speaker is not fair and is biased. However, this is very difficult to verify because one needs access to both the rejected paper and the accepted paper to make a judgment on this issue. Whatever the case, dealing with such issues can be a challenge for authors, and they need to be resilient enough not to let these issues dishearten them. This resilience is more important in relation to harsh and offensive as well as emotionally discouraging comments because such comments are more likely to result in authors' low confidence (Kwan, 2013; Oermann & Hays, 2011).

There were also three codes related to power, namely vague comments, abuse of peer review, and stance. The second code here, that is, abusing of peer review as explained earlier, is obviously very unprofessional. However, considering the other two codes as unprofessional may be contentious. On the one hand, the participants may be right in thinking that the reviewers did not bother to explain much about their comments and that the reviewers were very confident to express their stance and position on a given topic all because the reviewers felt they are in a position of power. On the other hand, reviewing a manuscript is inherently a critical evaluation and judgment of it, and therefore reviewers should feel free to express their stance. Moreover, it was the participants' perceptions that reviewers' comments were vague, while reviewers themselves may think that their comments are clear enough, and may accuse authors as having insufficient linguistic and research knowledge to fully understand their comments. An interesting area of investigation, then, is to see how reviewers think about the vagueness of their comments.

The next two challenges were dealing with editors' decisions on manuscripts (in the sense of tolerating multiple revisions, rejection with no justifiable reasons, and major revisions) and handling peer review duration. These two challenges seem to be interrelated because both require patience and diligence on the part of the authors. The fact that these issues were challenges for the participants may suggest that either they are usually in a hurry to publish papers or they are not used to conventionally long peer review and

publication processes. Similar to biased comments, authors may not be able to do anything about rejection with no justifiable reasons, but they can at least increase their patience and diligence concerning multiple and major revisions and usually long peer review duration. Otherwise, they may have to forgo publishing their papers, because publishing a paper usually takes a long time (Pickering & Byrne, 2014), and may involve multiple revisions of submitted papers.

The next challenge was language issues, which were also considered as an evaluative focus, as discussed earlier. The participants attached particular importance to language issues because such problems were both one of the reviewers' evaluative foci and one of the authors' challenges in dealing with peer reviews. For reviewers, language issues as an evaluative criterion may not be as important as other evaluative criteria (Belcher, 2007; Coniam, 2012). However, language issues may particularly matter to authors because if they master English grammar, they not only can better express themselves in response to peer reviews, but they can also provide better and neater scholarly papers, at least as far as language issues are concerned. As mentioned in relation to dealing with editors' decisions on papers and handling peer review duration, language issues too seem to be a rectifiable problem, overcoming which requires patience, diligence, and practice.

The participants reported tolerating the strict standards of journals for publication as the next challenge. As mentioned before, the participants accused some national journals and reviewers of judging submitted papers too quickly, and some international journals of being biased. Moreover, they felt that authors' fame could contribute to the acceptance of manuscripts. Now, regardless of the fact that these accusations and feelings may or may not be fair or justified, they exist. Therefore, authors may have to accept strict standards of journals and get used to it. Otherwise, they may lose their motivation and enthusiasm for conducting more research and writing more papers. Authors may not be able to do anything about the strict standards of journals, but they can at least try to have a positive attitude to it. Also, authors may not expect a journal to be both lenient with evaluating and accepting a paper and at the same time a high-profile journal. This is probably because journals become high-profile over time if they have high standards for publication, meaning that the strict standards of journals and their high status in a particular field go hand in hand. Therefore, authors should try to boost the standard and quality of their papers if they wish to publish in prestigious journals. This can pose another challenge to authors as they not only have to tolerate the strict standards of journals, but they also have to master English and learn more about research to increase the quality and standard of their papers.

The participants' belief that the political sanctions imposed on Iran put them at a disadvantage was ranked as another challenge. Although in one case one of the participants mentioned that one editor frankly mentioned the sanction issue as the reason for rejecting the author's paper, in other cases this challenge was just speculation. Thus, it is not clear how much of a problem this sanction issue is and whether some journal editors are really influenced by it. Although this may be a rare issue that Iranian surgeons may face in publishing their papers, its probable existence can unfairly put them at a disadvantage in fierce competition among submitted papers to be published in a given journal.

Social factors was identified as the next challenge. It was mentioned that familiarity with authors and their affiliations may influence editors' decisions on manuscripts. It is a clear case of favoritism and unprofessionalism if an editor is more lenient with a paper and more willing to publish it only because he or she knows the author in person. This is probably more the case in national journals as many editors who are based in a particular country may know their colleagues in other universities of the same country. This issue, then, may disadvantage the authors who do not have such social familiarity and bond with editors, which is clearly an unfair challenge that some authors may face.

Another challenge was knowing how to respond to the reviewers' comments, a difficulty that was named framing response in our thematic analysis. As mentioned earlier, limited linguistic proficiency and limited research knowledge made it difficult for authors to express themselves well in responding to reviewers' comments. As discussed in relation to language issues, framing response also seems to be a challenge for which there are some solutions. Authors should try to make themselves well-versed in both research and English. Otherwise, they will remain dependent on other experts' help, the ones who know English and research well.

Collaboration among authors was cited as the next challenge. Finding coauthors who are well-versed in research and statistics and collaborating well with them made it difficult for some authors to conduct research. This may be more of a problem among surgeons because they usually have a busy schedule. It can be difficult for surgeons to perform many operations, read about research, learn statistics, and write a paper individually. Even if they are already proficient in English and well-read in research, they still may need the help and collaboration of their colleagues in conducting research as they may not have enough time to do all parts of conducting a study by themselves. If this is really the case, collaboration may matter more to surgeons, in particular, and other researchers who are overwhelmed by their jobs. Overcoming this challenge, then, requires learning collaborative skills as it may prove useful in conducting research.

The last challenge that was discussed by the participants was selecting the right journal for submitting their papers. In this regard, three issues made it difficult to choose among journals, namely the duration of peer reviews, the strict standards of journals for publication, and whether a journal is well-indexed. Authors may not be able to do anything about any of these three issues, and therefore it is totally up to them and their circumstances to decide if a journal is suitable for them or not. Naturally, high-profile journals have stricter expectations and higher standards (Hyland & Jiang, 2020), and therefore, publishing in them can be more difficult but at the same time more eye-catching as far as authors' recognition and career are concerned. As mentioned above, it depends on authors to choose between a journal that is less famous and more lenient and a journal that is more famous and stricter. The last challenge, then, seems to be a more personal one compared to other challenges.

Habibie and Flowerdew (2023) discuss the issue of critical language awareness and pragmatic orientations in research publication. They further highlight the role of disciplinary and social justice issues in researchers' empirical endeavors and the challenges associated with them. The findings of the current study add to their discussion by highlighting that academicians' challenges could stem from not only language and

critical perspectives but also from the personal issues they experience. This finding is further in line with Li and Flowerdew (2020) regarding the positive and negative dimensions of professional challenges and the multidimensionality of challenges in personal, professional, and sociocultural terms.

Concerning the last research question that investigated the influence of peer reviews on the participants' motivation for publishing more papers, it was reported that in most cases (i.e., 20 participants) the motivation did not change positively or negatively because of peer reviews. However, in six cases, the motivation for publication was changed for the better. Therefore, it may be the case that although some peer review comments can be disheartening, the motivation to publish papers may be so multifaceted that peer reviews alone may not be able to negatively affect it. Scholars may, for example, want to publish a paper for its status and recognition or for making headway in their careers (Ibrahim et al., 2022), among other reasons. Therefore, not only may not peer reviews decrease authors' motivation to publish more papers, but they may indeed contribute to further publication because, as mentioned before, peer reviews may increase authors' research competence and knowledge.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions may be drawn from this study. Concerning the first research question, it was found that peer review could influence the researchers' attitudes both positively and negatively in terms of changing or unchanging such attitudes. Additionally, the participants enumerated a number of research-related issues such as rigor, quality of the argument, and language in relation to assessing the papers, and highlighted the presence of disciplinary, personal, professional, and sociocultural challenges in getting their papers published. It was also found that peer review can negatively influence the authors' motivation or encourage them to conduct more rigorous studies to enhance their chance of publication in future works.

The results of this study can be important for authors, reviewers, and editors, among others. The results can be important for authors because they can better understand their own challenges in getting their papers published. This way, they can become familiar with the challenges and attempt to better deal with the arising challenges. The results may also benefit reviewers as they can become more familiar with how authors may think and feel about peer reviews and reviewers' comments. The implication is that most reviewers are themselves researchers and can receive the same comments from their peers. Thus, knowing about the challenges and motivations may change their perceptions in providing more helpful comments that result in more quality articles. Moreover, the results can be important to editors as they can better understand how authors may think and feel about editors' decisions on submitted manuscripts, about the complicated and typically long process of publication, and about the professionality of editors. This way, editors can seek the extent their submitting contributors could become the journal readership and this helps them revisit their policies to reduce the gap between the journals and researchers. Furthermore, our findings may substantiate the need for establishing ERPP courses and can be of value to course designers, ERPP practitioners as well as novice researchers.

As far as the limitations of this study are concerned, it is to be noted that, first and

foremost, the small sample size may not allow one to draw firm conclusions from the results of the study. Moreover, the researchers were not provided with authors' commented papers to evaluate whether reviewers' comments did really mean or suggest what the authors thought they mean or suggest. The study was also limited to some Iranian surgeons, and therefore, the results of similar investigations may be different in other contexts, whether in medical or non-medical ones. It should also be highlighted that some of the study participants were novice researchers and had published a few papers. Thus, the issue of experience may have influenced the study results. It is suggested that future research take into account and compare the perceptions and challenges of novice and experienced researchers.

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Appendix 1

The Interview' Main Questions and Follow-up Questions

Questions related to the first research question
- What are your attitudes towards peer reviews?

The follow-up question: Have your attitudes towards academic publication, in general, and the peer review process, in particular, changed during your professional career?

Questions related to the second research question
- What have been the main evaluative foci of peer review reports?

The follow-up question: Are they mainly related to author competence, overall verdict, quality of the arguments, language, or research design?

Questions related to the third research question
- What challenges do you often face during the peer review process?

The follow-up question: Are challenges mainly related to linguistic barriers, understanding the comments, issues of power, duration of peer reviews, multiple revisions, and difficulties in framing response to reviewers' comments and editorial correspondence?

Questions related to the fourth research question
- Have peer review comments influenced your motivation to publish? The follow-up question: If yes, how?