

Identity in undergraduate L2 writing: A juxtaposition of academic voice and internal voices

By Gulnigar Baham, Humber College (Kansai Foreign Languages University), Canada

Abstract

Despite mounting research on the potential that cultivating self-identity affords students, it is often forgotten in most academic contexts, whether in instruction or assessment, that L2 writers have an L1 identity. In all avenues of higher education, researchers agree that multiple, complex, and simultaneous identities of students are advantageous for their advancement in academic writing (Cohen, 2011; Cummins, 2001; Leki, 2008); however, institutional practices, persisting social conventions, and student-teacher relationships (or lack thereof) place a greater pressure for L2 undergraduate students specifically. International and immigrant/generation 1.5 undergraduate students arrive in their new settings with their L1 knowledge base and are often expected to forego rhetorical strategies of their L1, as well as their linguistic and cultural repertoire, to write academically in their L2. While “no single theory can account for” and solve these issues (Cumming, 2016), lack of affordances in their multiple identities is at the root of many writing problems that L2 undergraduate students face.

The academic voice: Introduction

The concept of *identity* or *subjectivity*, as an ever-evolving entity, has emerged from the margins and has taken center stage in social sciences, applied linguistics, and critical pedagogy of the last two decades. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory has established a framework for which language interactions mediate learning and negotiate identities. In the zone of proximal development (ZPD), students engage in language



interactions and build upon their knowledge through social mediation. Activity theory suggests a complex network of actions that is performed on language and by language, unraveling many new perspectives in psychoanalysis and behavioural studies in relation learning. We have realized that language learning in today's increasingly mobile and diverse societies develop in complex multilingual and plurilingual contexts, by exhibiting affordances through acceptance of multiple student identities (Piccardo, 2017; Galante, 2019). We have even transcended beyond the learner to focus on the knowledge base and conceptualizations of language teachers and the impact of their pedagogical identities (Johnson, 2009).

Despite all this effort to move forward, high stakes attached to academic writing and its assessment shows that modernist dichotomies are still prevalent in practice. Granted, a shift in perspectives is never instantaneous and there is still a lot of ground we must cover in L2 writing research. This autobiographical piece aims to contribute my simultaneous and often conflicting—in the face of social conventions—perspectives on writing.

I tread carefully as I write about the prolonged dichotomies in undergraduate L2 writing, not to rebuild further dichotomies of modernism/postmodernism, positivism/relativism, or structuralism/poststructuralism. My purpose is not to deprecate and dismiss decades of practice and research in order to raise concern for the complex intricacies of human behaviour and its effects on L2 writing. Rather, I hope to provide my experience on the traditions and conventions of undergraduate studies that have impacted my writing development in English as one of the 1.5 generation of L2 students.

Equally important is the distinction that I intend to make of the struggles that postgraduate L2 English students face and the struggles of L2 English students who have begun their undergraduate studies. It is clear that, from the structural perspective, the expectations for writing vary according to discipline, genre, and program of study. From the sociocultural perspective, however, undergraduate L2 English students demand more mediation and support to succeed in their writing, regardless of profession or program, and thereby find their voices in their identity negotiations.

L2 English writers in undergraduate settings

In a stark juxtaposition to the complex nature of L2 writers, beyond their linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, and their various sets of learning skills, English academic writing is traditionally, and perhaps ironically, structural. There are many genre-specific formats and rules to follow since the expectation for written communication is stricter than for oral communication. Assessment of writing ability mostly determines the success of students' academic careers and ultimately decides if they are able to pursue graduate academic careers. Therefore, with such grim consequences, it is only natural that L2 English



undergraduates take blind leaps in their academic careers to adapt and conform to all rules to please the readers (who also happen to be the real assessors of their writing).

In addition, undergraduate settings pose a challenge to all students even without the added complexities of functioning in a foreign language. In a longitudinal analysis of attrition rates in a Canadian university, Wintre et al. (2006) identify the leading cause of high attrition rates in undergraduates is emerging adulthood and personal struggles. Regardless of discipline, undergraduate students step into adulthood—from “the ages of 18 through to the late 20s are [in] a period of exploration during which individuals attempt to clarify their identity in a variety of different areas” (Wintre et al., 2006, p. 112). During a similar journey of self-discovery, L2 English undergraduate students in Western institutions often face subtle internal conflicts between their core L1 identities and their newly established L2 identities, as a result of those tiny but strong traces of conventional practices in post-secondary institutions.

Unlike graduate students, undergraduate students juggle and process a mountain of new information with equally little social support (Okuda & Anderson, 2018). It is often their first exposure to highly technical and discipline-specific language; while at the graduate level, L2 students have established some sense of familiarity with their topic of interest, allowing them to assert their voice and identity in their work. On the other hand, undergraduates must also learn additional cultural references and colloquiums to fit in their respective discipline specific communities.

Add to that the fast-paced, mass-produced, impersonal learning environments, the significantly lop-sided instructor to student ratio of most undergraduate lectures, the lack of specific support for L2 students, various parental pressures (financial, ideological, etc.), and the persisting effects of culture shock, undergraduate studies are a battleground of identities for L2 English undergraduate students.

Identity as disadvantage; Assimilation as success

Often L2 English undergraduate students’ entire knowledge base and cognitive processing is in their L1. This, of course, shapes their identities and their ways of negotiating power (Cummins, 2001). As a result, by the time L2 students arrive at their undergraduate institutions, they have multiple and complex linguistic and cultural identities.

Today, even in the face of all of the backlash towards the “deficit” approaches and “native-speaker” idealizations, most of us are “fixated on helping learners of English develop the ability to produce texts, usually academic, that are reader-friendly to those we privilege as native speakers of English” (Belcher, 2012, p. 132). And in our aspirations to assimilate and help assimilate, students and even teachers have shoved aside their L1 identities as disadvantageous to their L2 English academic careers (Cummins, 2001; Johnson, 2009), constructing an L1/L2 binary.



In reality, the majority of English speakers are non-native. English is often an additional language that expresses our individual identities. Accordingly, as long as we have an additional language, our writing, whether in L1, L2, or L3, is largely shaped by the identities manifested by all of our linguistically coded knowledge. Assimilation in this context involves cultivating identities in all of our linguistic repertoires. Yet, aforementioned academic settings of undergraduate studies make this entirely difficult to achieve. As a result, similar power struggles in writing identity ultimately drain and reshape the writing identities of L2 undergraduate students (Ivanič, 1998).

The *alien* voice

Writing voice can be defined as the nuanced, assertive, and descriptively present ways that writers convey their meaning (Javdan, 2014). In English, the writer's voice is a criterion in successful academic writing. However, perception of that *voice* is very limited, monolingual, and monocultural in most undergraduate writing.

In a recent study of four Korean L2 English students in their first-year composition class at a U.S. university, Lee (2016) makes interesting discoveries about the differences of authorship and voice in two different genres of writing: narrative and argumentative. Jimin, one of the research subjects in the study, reveals that she feels more confident with narrative writing as she does not have to follow a "certain conventional style", thus being "honest" with herself (Lee, 2016, p. 181). Another student, Yuna, admitted that the conventions of argumentative writing made her second guess her choices, compounding her writing apprehension in the genre. Lee suggests that narrative writing allowed the student subjects of the study to express their own identities in an authoritative voice (Lee, 2016). Furthermore, the students' lack of authoritative voice in the argumentative writing is a result of feelings of alienation they experience from the conventions of the genre, as well as their reluctance toward accepting it as their own because of a lack of representation in the genre.

While it is true that such *alien* perceptions of voice can present itself in graduate L2 English students, it is more prevalent in undergraduate students due to their lack of experience in social, academic, and professional settings. These rhetorical struggles are aggravated by identity and power negotiations inherent in undergraduate studies. In the brief period when they are most impressionable, undergraduate L2 English students find themselves ready to forego all previous knowledge in order to *harmonize* their identities.

Similar to identity, L2 rhetorical voice is dynamic and constantly developing as a result of continuous academic input and output. L2 English writers' voice is a dialogic process that must be cultivated in relation to their other language identities, as it is impossible to separate.

The following section, a narrative meta-analysis, will mirror the previous, academic voice, in structure only.



Internal voice: Introduction

Reminiscing my undergraduate years, I often find myself fortunate to have been thrown into the secondary schools of Toronto at a relatively young age (I transferred between several schools.). Conforming to my immigrant parents' expectations and idealizations, I achieved *native-like* oral fluency before I was admitted to university. I had a strong writing background in my previous languages because my mother, a journalist, strongly encouraged me to keep a diary from as far back as I can remember.

In my high school ESL and academic English courses, my teachers praised my syntax, style, and imagery. However proud I was to receive praise for my English writing, I never felt at home in the English language. With course readings, I often lost interest when I did not understand the intertextual or cultural references. Writing was important to me; writing was “an act of identity” (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, p. 228). Soon, I determined that in order to write like the *native* speakers I needed rigorous exposure to the culture and language. So, I enrolled in the English literature program at York University.

L2 English writer in an academic setting

As soon as my first semester began, I realized how foolish a decision this was. I knew nothing about what it was like to transition from high school to university. I was still under immense culture shock, as I had only been in Canada for 4 years. Time flew as I slowly figured out, among other things, the locations of my classes, my college affiliation, my commute to and from school, what a course syllabus was, and the amount of discipline I needed to keep my new exposure to freedom in check. All the while, my first-year course readings consisted of Shakespeare, The Bible, specifically Genesis, Plato's Republic, Beowulf, and seemingly endless amount of English literary traditions, theories, and genres.

Identity as disadvantage; Assimilation as success

In my mind, perpetuated by the remnants of colonial era dominance of the English language and its persistence in practice today, despite the multicultural diversity of Toronto, the only way of acquiring knowledge of English literature and culture was by extensively studying British and American cultures. My course choices reflected this, and subsequently I was in the midst of an elitist culture that cultivated perfection and idealized superior *native* writing, alienating me as the *other*. Under this influence, *I* was consciously alienating me. This resulted in the most difficult two years of my academic career. I returned from the brink of dropping out, becoming one of the numbers in attrition statistics.



The *alien* voice

When it was time for writing, I was no longer the star writer of the class. I learned every single academic writing format the hard way, through trial and error, and as a result of many low grades. Needless to say, I did not do so well in my first year, or in my subsequent years for that matter. When I realized that I had to find help, ashamed to speak to my professors, I went to the writing centre. The centres' strict no proofreading policy pushed me away further. The writing coaches questioned my ideas time and time again, while providing no support for the complex structures suddenly imposed in undergraduate writing. My problem was not finding ideas or inspiration. I had plenty of ideas, but I struggled to fit it in the molds of literary academic papers in English. Writing in my previously acquired languages bore no resemblance to English writing conventions. My papers often came back with the TA's scribbles about lack of quotes and references or that they did not understand the point I was making. Suddenly, the language and culture I desperately hoped to identify with alienated me. Despite my oral fluency and my extensive L1 writing background, I felt incapable of writing. It took me a long time, after I had long completed the courses, to understand the concept of rhetoric.

Of course, I realize that my situation is somewhat unique. Not a single one of my ESL friends and peers enrolled in an English literature program. However, I am certain, from cross-discipline conversations with my ESL peers, that others experience similar disconnect between their internal voice and academic voice.

Conclusion

As I write, I am simultaneously a teacher of English as a Second Language to international adult learners and a student of Language and Literacies Education at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education). Frequently, I find myself reassessing my pedagogical decisions in my EAP classrooms, as my learner/teacher identity confronts the institutional policies of my place of employment. I understand that my writing instruction shapes the identities of my students; however, both my students and I find it difficult to steer clear from conforming to monolingual ideals prevalent in English language learning. The struggle is immediate, yet this is a battle we must choose to fight because lexical and structural issues in student writing can be instantly corrected; however, apprehension, demotivation, and overall alienation of L2 writing voice is difficult to salvage.



References

- Belcher, D. (2012). Considering what we know and need to know about second language writing. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 3(1), 131–150.
- Burgess, A., & Ivanič, R. (2010). Writing and being written: Issues of identity across timescales. *Written Communication*, 27(2), 228–255.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088310363447>
- Cohen, S. L. (2011). Making room for identity in second language writing: The promise and possibilities of dual language identity texts. *Writing & Pedagogy*, 3(2), 217–239.
- Cumming, A. (2016). Theoretical orientations to L2 writing. In R. Manchón & P. K. Matsuda (Eds.), *Handbook of second and foreign language writing* (pp. 65–88). Walter de Gruyter.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614511335-006>
- Cummins, J. (2001). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Galante, A. (2020). “The moment I realized I am plurilingual”: Plurilingual tasks for creative representations in EAP at a Canadian university. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 11(4), 551–580.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2018-0116>
- Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursual construction of identity in academic writing*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Javdan, S. (2014). Identity manifestation in second language writing through notion of voice: A review of literature. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(3), 631–635.
<https://doi:10.4304/tpls.4.3.631-635>
- Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education: A sociocultural perspective*. Routledge
- Lee, S. (2017). Writer identity in narrative and argumentative genres: A case of Korean students in the United States. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 6(1), 178–188. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.1p.178>
- Leki, I. (2007). *Undergraduates in a second language: Challenges and complexities of academic literacy development*. Erlbaum.
- Okuda, T., & Anderson, T. (2018). Second language graduate students’ experiences at the writing center: A language socialization perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52(2), 391–413.
- Piccardo, E. 2017. Plurilingualism as a catalyst for creativity in superdiverse societies: A systemic analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1–13. <https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02169>
- Wintre, M., Bowers, C., Gordner, N., & Lange, L. (2006). Re-evaluating the university attrition statistic: A longitudinal follow-up study. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 21(2), 111–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558405285658>



Author Bio

Gulnigar is an assistant professor at Humber College's off-shore English program at Kansai Foreign Languages University. She has since completed her M.Ed in Language and Literacies Education from OISE, University of Toronto. Having taught ESL to all ages since 2014, she has recently been focused on delivering EAP and TOEFL programs to post-secondary students.

