

# Developing a cross-cultural framework to teach academic writing in the L2 classroom

By Andrés Esteban Chinchín Talavera, Canada

## Introduction

It is through interaction with other individuals that people know and understand who they are and their roles and limitations within society (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Different societies have different values and beliefs that shape their world views from the macro level of ideological structures to the micro level of social activity (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). For this reason, it is imperative that any individual who desires to write well in each language be able to understand the ideological structures of the chosen culture to communicate appropriately. This article provides an insight into the role that writing plays in the creation of identities and ideologies, and presents a theoretical framework developed by Jim McKinley (2015) to allow learners to develop a cross-cultural writer identity and critical thinking through the combination of socio-cultural theory, identity construction theory, and critical argument theory.

## Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies

Ideologies are ideas and beliefs which constitute a worldview by which people make sense of reality. Humanities theories and researchers have stated that there is “no ideology-free observation or thought” (Scott, 2015, p. 48). Language does not exist outside the realm of culture and ideology, so writing, being a language activity, is ideological in nature.

For educators who seek to develop a writing program, the question “what sort of social group do I intend to apprentice the learner into?” (Gee, 2008, p. 48, as cited in Scott, 2015, p. 48) is a pivotal one since it acknowledges that literacy has the task of negotiating identities and ideologies in specific social situations. It is part of what creates and distinguishes social groups. Literacy can never be a neutral and isolated discipline, but rather one that is socially situated and focused on social involvements and consequences (Scott, 2015). Since writing is always tied to power struggles, the contestation of identities, and perpetuation of belief



systems, Villanueva (2015) provides two simple questions that can begin to uncover the power dynamics in any type of writing, “what’s being said? and what’s left unsaid?” (p. 58).

Writers cannot be disassociated from their writing, and it takes time for them to adapt to new situations. In fact, it is through writing that a person is shaped into new environments and adapts to the values and beliefs of new social contexts (Scott, 2015). When students in an academic writing class can meet the research and writing requirements, one may say that they “enact an identity in response to social expectations for who they are and what they should be doing” (Scott, 2015, p. 49).

Thus, the main purpose of writing is not to develop a set of skills but rather become a certain kind of person (Roozen, 2015, p. 51). One may conclude that the difficulty that people may have with writing may not be due to the lack of intelligence or poor level of literacy, but rather the inability to see himself as part of a particular community. According to Estrem (2015), identity formation requires “conventions, practices, habits, and approaches of their discipline” (p. 56). Once attained, however, identities are never clearly delineated, and individuals may choose to emphasize one over another “depending, on the context, audience, and rhetorical task” (Villanueva, 2015, p. 57).

Writing is never private; it is always part of an ongoing conversation, and it is shaped by previous experiences and interactions that the writer has had with communities and read materials. Even when the writer engages in a private exercise, this practice draws knowledge from prior social exposures. Finally, writing instructors must be aware that previous experiences have the potential of either raising or diminishing the learners’ feelings towards writing. Also, positive experiences are not always helpful, since what worked in one context is not always helpful in another (Lunsford, 2015).

## Learning conventions and cultural framework

After having delved a general ideological significance of writing, now it is important to consider that L2 writing education has been pragmatic, whereas L1 writing education has been ideological (Santos, 1992). In this regard, L1 learners have the possibility to critically examine the power structures and political dynamics that influence their lives, while L2 learners obtain the ability to suffice for their immediate needs such as understanding assignments and completing academic essays (McKinley, 2015).

Additionally, one must consider that the ideologies which L2 writers bring into the classroom are not always in complete alignment with North American worldviews and values. For this reason, McKinley (2015) has worked on a cultural theoretical framework for EFL academic writing using three learning theories: (1) Social cultural theory, (2) Identity construction theory, and (3) Critical argument theory. Also, he has mediated the interrelationship between them using academic discourse.



## Sociocultural theory

This learning theory focuses on “the sociocultural convention of academic discourse” (McKinley, 2015, p. 187). In a constructivist approach, this convention studies the way writers develop an authorial self. This is done through the critical examination of sources, citing evidence, stating claims, and creating and addressing counter arguments. Barton (1995) claims that “through the use of contrastive connectives such as however, writers are constructing a cultural identity by taking an interpersonal approach” (McKinley, 2015, p. 188).

## Identity construction theory

This theory encompasses the writer’s development of a cultural and academic identity. According to McKinley (2015) social interactions are the way in which “individuals develop an understanding of their position in relationship to others within the same community” (p. 186). This means that writers will develop their academic and cultural identity through written discourse as they attempt to persuade readers through their word choice in a specific social and cultural settings (Ivanic, 1998, as cited in McKinley, 2015, p. 186).

## Critical argument theory

The traditional and systematic patterns of teaching reading and writing are essential. However, it is not here where critical thinking takes place, but rather in the interactions where students are required to work collaboratively with their peers and with academic text to construct knowledge and resolve conflict, which is achieved through extensive critical reading (McKinley, 2015). Students, however, may use different ways to develop an argument. These ways may be inductive or deductive, as well as drawing from the writers’ own schemata or extensive reading on the topic (McKinley, 2015).

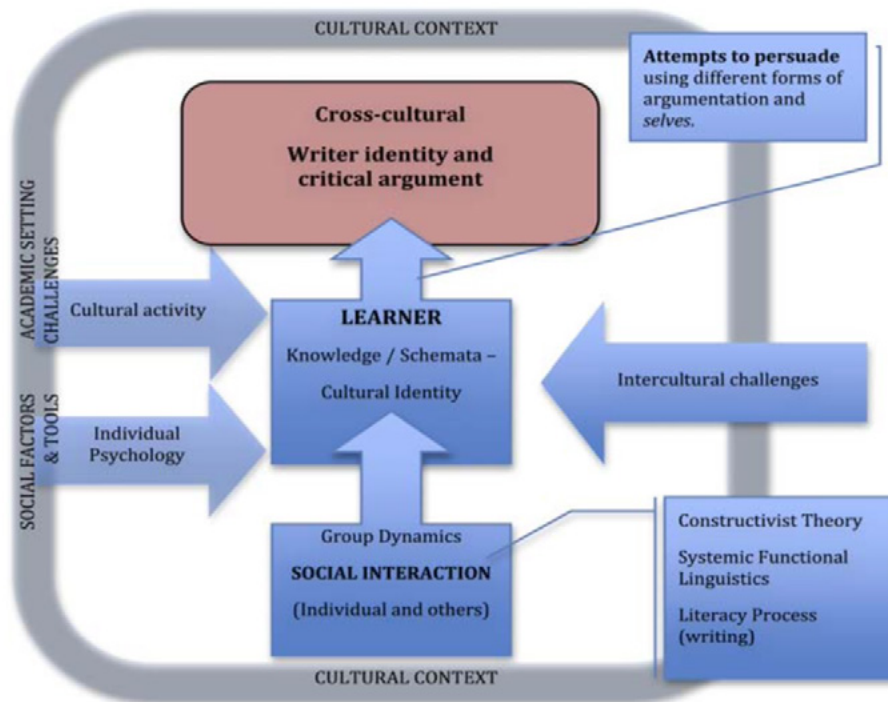
The combination of these three theories can allow researchers to develop a theoretical framework which will aid in the construction of cross-cultural writer identity and critical argument.

## Theoretical Framework

Through the combination of these three theories, McKinley (2015) has developed a theoretical framework which is presented into a visual (Figure 1), which shows the construction of critical thinking and argumentation in L2 writing. The square in the middle represents the social context in which the individual will create their argument. At the bottom of the chart is the social interaction, which is based on the constructivist theory, systemic function linguistics, and literacy process. It is through social interactions that the individual becomes aware of these theories (McKinley, 2015, p. 202). After that, through group dynamics, the learner will advance to the next stage—Learner.



Figure 1 - Theoretical framework of general concepts



Note: Theoretical framework of general concepts. From *Critical argument and writer identity: Social constructivism as a theoretical framework for EFL academic writing* by Jim McKinley, 2015.

At the Learner's stage, students will use their schemata and knowledge to address the intercultural challenges, which will be scaffolded by social factor tools—individual psychology—, and academic setting challenges created by the instructor to develop a new self that will allow the individual to bridge the intercultural gap in his attempt to provide a persuasive and critical intercultural argument, while yielding space for the creation of a cross-cultural self as a by-product.

This framework is dependent on social constructivist theories, which assert that learning takes place in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as defined by Vygotsky (1978) “[ZPD refers to] the distance between the [individual] developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under...guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (as cited in Mirzaei & Eslami, 2015, p. 6). In other words, it is the place where the learner reaches an appropriate level of self-awareness of his/her skills and strives to achieve his/her potential through the interaction and assistance of more skillful peers (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Also, the social cultural theory understands that human mental activity is rooted in community discursive practices. However, it is important to mention that not all social encounters will provide affordances for

self-development, but only those that happen within the ZPD in a context where assistance is scaffolded and mediated through a semiotic tool—language being the main semiotic tool of mediation (De Guerrero, & Villamil, 2000).

Finally, in this exercise, it is crucial for learners and assistants to achieve and maintain intersubjectivity in their interaction; this means, “an intermental point where individual minds come to share common perspectives and an equal degree of commitment to the task” (Rommetveit, 1985, as cited in De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, p. 53). Given the nature of social constructivism, this will be an unnegotiable condition for success within the ZPD.

## Conclusion

As it has been observed in this article, writing is not only about skill development, but the formation of a new self (Roozen, 2015, p. 51). This does not mean to be able to communicate ideas, but to actively and efficiently participate within a given society and community. Hence, the proposed theoretical framework has the potential to revolutionize writing instructions and facilitate the creation of methods and teaching practices that will use social constructivism and work within the Zone of Proximal Development to elicit the creation of a new self, which will also be a capable and responsible member of the chosen society.

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### Author Bios

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**Andrés Chinchín Talavera is an Academic Writing Professor at University of Canada West in Vancouver, British Columbia. He has 8 years of experience working with emigrants and international students at various settings, from high school to university, and is expecting to begin his PhD in Language, Culture and Literacy in September 2024.**

