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SECOND LANGUAGE ACADEMIC WRITER IDENTITY, RELATIONS OF POWER AND DISCOURSE PRACTICES

ABSTRACT

Our purpose in this paper is to show how the output of academic student-writers demonstrates the different ways in which they react to the discipline's discursual demands and how that, in turn, forms their writer identity. We also argue that the current Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory fails to adequately integrate notions of second language (L2) academic writer identity and the social contexts in which L2 writers produce their texts.

KEYWORDS: second language acquisition, academic writing, writer identity, relations of power, interdiscursivity

STRESZCZENIE

Naszym celem w tym artykule jest pokazanie, w jaki sposób twórczość studentów akademickich wskazuje na różne sposoby reagowania wobec dyskursywnych wymagań danej dyscypliny i jaki, z kolei, ma to wpływ na formowanie się pisarskiej tożsamości studentów. Twierdzimy również, że obecna teoria nabywania drugiego języka (SLA) nie jest w stanie skontaminować pojęcia tożsamości autora akademickiego piszącego w drugim języku z kontekstami społecznymi, w których te teksty powstają.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: nabywanie drugiego języka, pisanie akademickie, tożsamość autorska, związki władzy, interdyskursywność

INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that previous theories of second language acquisition (SLA) do not sufficiently explain the influence of individual and environmental factors on authorial self-representation in L2 academic writing. We argue that this is due to the absence of a comprehensive theory that integrates L2 academic writer identity and the contexts of text production. In particular, we point out that SLA theorists have not exhaustively investigated how, in academic contexts, relations of

power constrain authorial self-representation. It is especially noticeable in the case of L2 academic writers where certain linguistic and identity options are not made available to them. The literary output of these writers demonstrates the different ways in which they react to these limitations: their struggle to claim rights to particular identities, and their resistance to those they do not identify with, or the unconditional acceptance of identities imposed on them by the dominant discourses. Because of the pressure on L2 writers to conform to the dominant discourse's literary practices, the latter reaction is more frequently the case, as has been revealed in the findings of Lehman's recent study (2018) on authorial presence in English academic texts.

As non-English speaking tertiary students not only have to process the discipline's knowledge and beliefs which are encoded in its discourses, but must also negotiate their new identity as budding academics in this discipline, it is important to consider how their output can demonstrate the different ways in which they react to the discipline's discursive demands and how that is reflected in their writer identity. Previous conceptualisations of SLA theory have failed to adequately integrate notions of L2 academic writer identity and the contexts in which L2 writers produce their texts.

SLA RESEARCH AND L2 LEARNER INVESTMENT

In the introduction to their book on SLA research Larsen-Freeman and Long affirm that, "at least forty 'theories' of SLA have been proposed" (1991: 227), which indicates how difficult and multi-faceted this area of human endeavour is to define and describe. In initial SLA research the focus was on the learner's passive reception of externally provided linguistic knowledge, then on the innate cognitive aspects of SLA, seeing learners as actively processing the linguistic input. Affective factors, such as personality and motivation were also investigated for their influences on SLA. As SLA was seen to be primarily influenced by the human need to communicate in various situations, the social and functional aspects of language were also considered focusing the notion that learning a second language implies learning about the language's people and culture (Lantolf/ Thorne 2007: 217–281). This shift in the research field from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to focusing more and more on the sociological and cultural dimensions of second language learning is what Block calls 'the social turn' (see Block 2003). So we can see that each theoretical framework brings with it a different focus and despite its limitations, brings something new to the understanding of this phenomenon. As van Lier points out, we can neither claim that learning is caused by environmental stimuli (a behaviorist position) nor that it is genetically determined (an innatist position), but rather, learning is the result of complex (and contingent) interactions between the individual and environment (1996: 170).

The more recent, central positioning of the individual in the process of SLA has led to the need for a “comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the individual language learner and the larger social world” (Norton/ McKinney 2010: 73). Recent research has questioned the binary approach to SLA (motivated-unmotivated, willing to communicate-not willing to communicate etc.), aiming to explore the “social and personal conditions under which [...] learning is done by learners” (Norton 2013: xiv). The fact that learners are both individual selves and social actors leads us then to consider the influence external factors can exert on second language users. For Norton, second language learning is a socially constructed phenomenon in that is impinged upon by the opportunities afforded to learners to use the L2, where the social circumstances “condition learners’ relative success and failure” (Norton 2013: xviii). We agree with Lave and Wenger when they exhort researchers to conceptualise learning as situated within particular communities of practice in which learners, to a greater or lesser extent, participate (Lave/ Wenger 1991). This difference in the degree of participation for many researchers today is dependent upon to what extent the dominant discourse practices legitimize or not the linguistic outputs of the second language learner. As Bourdieu points out the “most radical, surest, and best hidden censorships are those which exclude certain individuals from communication” (Bourdieu 1977: 648).

Applying these conceptualizations to second language academic writing provides us with specific community of practice in which academic texts conform structurally to English native speaker logic, which is essentially linear in the development of thoughts and ideas and which are presented in the order dictated by the essay genre. As Gotti points out, “hegemonic tendencies have been identified [...] in academic English” (2007: 150) and non-native, tertiary students who need to study and write in English are generally expected to conform to these discipline-specific, dominant norms and conventions in the belief that in doing so they will be seen as having an authentic voice. In this way L2 academic writers are positioned in terms of the power relations in language use and react in different ways to these institutional constraints. Their reactions reveal the individual struggle to claim rights to certain identities; resistance to those they do not identify with, or their unconditional acceptance of identities imposed on them by the dominant discourses. For Lave and Wenger, second language learning needs to be conceptualised as being situated in a particular community of practice and there is a strong relationship between degrees of participation in that community and the construction of the learner’s identity (Lave/ Wenger 1991). Along the same lines, Norton (2013) accentuates the importance of the sociological construct of *investment* in language learning and teaching, which signals the links between language learner identity and language learning commitment. She argues that “a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community [...]. Alternatively, the language practices of the classroom may not be consistent with learner expectations of good teaching, which

equally dire results for language learning” (Norton 2013: 3). It is clear then that participation for second language users is not just about aligning themselves with the requirements of a new discourse community, but is the learners’ decision about the extent to which they are willing to get engaged in social interaction and community practices.

Academic writing is traditionally considered as a genre which is restrictive and therefore not conducive to individual creativity. However this view is being challenged with researchers and practitioners viewing engagement with discipline genres as not necessarily stepping into “a pre-packaged self, as individuals can use the options available to them to *position themselves* in terms of personal stance” (Hyland 2015: 3. His italics). For Hyland, disciplinary communities are considered as sites of engagement, providing a framework or shorthand for the discourse’s practices, not as an imposed, inviolable format. This conception of disciplinary genre argues for second language academic writers to approximate themselves to the discursal conventions of the discourse community in order to relate their rhetorical choices to those routinely performed by other writers in the field. Hyland, in other words, sees the process of academic identity formation as “taking on and shaping the discourses and practices of our communities to construct a self both distinctive from and similar to those of its members” (ibid: 10). This has been evidenced in Lehman’s (2018) study on authorial presence in academic texts written in English, in which she found that due to the degree of pressure on L2 writers to conform in this way, the latter reaction was the preferred choice for writer voice.

THE STUDY

Lehman’s enquiry (2018) expands on Norton’s (1997) theory of identity, which outlines a poststructuralist conception of identity as being multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change across time and space. The research aim was to demonstrate the importance of identity research in providing a framework that will help learners in the development of their writing competence in a second language. By doing so, Lehman articulates what is at the core of language production: the dialectic of individual, cognitive, affective and sociocultural factors, which all inter-relate to shape the language user’s linguistic identity. One area of concern is her belief that SLA theorists have not exhaustively investigated how in academic contexts relations of power, as set up mainly by the assessment processes, constrain authorial self-representation. Following Foucault (1980), she argues that power is not only exercised at the macro level of powerful institutions, such as political or legal systems, but also at the micro level of everyday social interactions situated within a given cultural and linguistic context. Language then, can be used as a means of social control and dominant languages, like English, can suppress linguistic

diversity through literacy practices which marginalize and disempower L2 users and minority groups.

The main aim of her study was to offer insights into how culturally and disciplinary diverse, tertiary-level students position themselves as writers and how this is manifested in their textual self-representations. To realize this objective, she adopted an anti-essentialist approach which focused on the performative aspects of identity, drawing on the theory and practice of Linguistic Anthropology, New Literacy Studies, and Gruzca's (2002) theory of linguistic identity, and employing research methods based on those used in Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Hyland's analysis of the use of metadiscourse markers in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural discourse.

The investigative focus of the research was based on Lehman's conceptualization of L2 academic writer identity, which is seen as the result of voices activated in the text and therefore equated with authorial voice (Zhao 2015: 33). She categorized writer voice, understood as a metonymic description of communicative competence, into three main types: individual, collective and depersonalized. The individual voice is a product of an individual's unique cognition, personality and life history, and enables writers to assume an authoritative and independent voice. It is socially co-constructed by the collective voice, which is formed by the individual's positioning in different social settings, relationships and tasks. The collective voice is a product of the writer's struggle for affiliation and belonging to a particular discourse community and results in the creation of a 'reader-considerate' voice, full of explicit signals that guide the reader through the text, and the use of references which establish commonality with readers. The depersonalized voice reflects the writer's degree of acceptance of the networks of disciplinary texts and the willingness to reproduce the disciplinary community's textual outputs. This alignment with disciplinary writing conventions is manifested in the choice the writer makes as to what extent to employ these conventions and in doing so, conceal and obfuscate the authorial presence in the text.

Specifically, the investigative focus was on how voice correlates with gender, linguistic competence, writing competence, nationality and academic discipline. To test the validity of the research assumptions, writing samples and questionnaires were collected from 310 students representing thirty cultures and four academic disciplines: English Studies, Management, Economics and Finance, and Accounting. The participants were recruited from the following universities: (1) the University of Social Sciences, Warsaw, Poland, (2) the University of Salamanca, Spain, (3) Kozminski University, Warsaw, Poland, and (4) Vistula University, Warsaw, Poland.

In this paper, however, we would like to focus on the part of the corpora, which was made up of recorded interviews with 30 Ukrainian students. In these interviews the participants re-constructed self-defining life events from their autobiographical past, with specific reference to their experiences with academic writing. In this way, Lehman's study was able to trace the examples of interdiscursivity, which is

Fairclough's term for "intertextual relations to conventions" (Fairclough 1992, as cited in Ivanič 1998: 48), as they occurred in the student-writers' autobiographical accounts. For Ivanič, interdiscursivity is a central concept for a theory of language and identity, as it explains how writers align themselves with the rhetorical conventions of their discourse communities (Ivanič 1998).

QUALITATIVE ANALYSES

The data provided by the interviews with the Ukrainian students was used to investigate qualitatively the following correlations:

- a) writing instruction, writing competence and dominant voice
- b) perceptions of self-worth in writing in Ukrainian and in English and dominant voice
- c) language preferences for academic writing and dominant voice.

These correlations revealed conspicuous self-positioning tendencies which were qualitatively described through the analyses of students' responses to the questions grouped around the following themes:

- a) The writing instruction they received with regard to composing academic texts
- b) Students' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses in writing in both Ukrainian and English
- c) Students' language preferences for academic writing and dominant voice

The collected data was coded according to these recurring themes and three identity options, as outlined by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), to provide a framework for investigating the influence of self-positioning tendencies on emergent voices of Ukrainian student-writers. *Imposed (or non-negotiable) aspects of identity* refer to those socio-cultural conventions, including power relations, which individuals cannot resist or contest and which are located within particular discourses. In the case of the present study's participants, these aspects of identity were reflected in the varying degrees of accommodation to, what students perceived as, the literary expectations of their disciplinary communities and individual teacher-evaluators. My interviewees equated high linguistic and writing competence with sounding 'academic', in that they felt they were producing texts which were in line with disciplinary sanctioned writing rules and norms, and devoid of personal, subjective elements. This position led to the obfuscation and effacing of authorial presence in the text, and resulted in the construction of D type of voice.

Extract from interview # 12:

All these writing assignments [in English] require special language, all these special and difficult words that you will never use in your ordinary life, but have to use them in essays to sound 'academic.' If I wanted to sound like 'me' I'd use different words. Also, I don't like that I have to repeat key words to make my writing coherent. For me it is a bad style.

Assumed (or non-negotiated) elements of identity are those constituted, according to S. Hall, in the process of imaginative production of identity (Hall 1990), with which individuals are comfortable and view as core parts. These aspects of identity were revealed in the ways students identified themselves with other members of their disciplinary community, in particular with their teacher-reader. This identity option allowed them to activate a specific voice that gave them access to their disciplinary discourse, and consequently created a feeling of belonging. In this way, they assumed a 'reader-friendly' voice, referred to as C type of voice.

Extract from interview # 3:

I can't say that I'm very good at writing in English. But I can say that I am getting better at this. I like the clarity of academic writing, it is very logical for me. I like the fact that I know what is expected of me and how to write to get a good grade. My writing teacher gives me very helpful tips.

Negotiable identities are the ones that can be and are contested and resisted in order to integrate fragmented, decentered, and shifting identities experienced by a second language user in their desire for a unified and coherent identity. Negotiable identities emerged when my interviewees positioned themselves as disagreeing with certain aspects of their disciplinary community's writing conventions because they went too much against the grain of what was associated with good writing in their first language. There were English modes of written expression they were unable to accept, which included more tactful and emotionally detached language. These aspects of writer identity which were not infiltrated by L2-influenced, rhetorical adjustments produced I type of voice, characterized by intentionality and marked by strong authorial presence.

Extract from interview # 14:

Polish for me is my second language, not English. I prefer expressing my thoughts in Polish rather than in English because I can express my thoughts like in Ukrainian. My writing in English is not always 'proper' because I can't avoid sounding argumentative and emotional. I like using flowery language and writing with passion.

FINDINGS

In the interviews the Ukrainian students discussed different ways in which they approach their L2 academic writing tasks by choosing identity options which are either imposed, assumed or negotiable. However, in their corpus writing samples they predominantly employed the rhetorical strategies of appropriation of disciplinary resources, rather than strategies of negotiation or resistance. It was found that the use of the dominant L2 writing strategies is tied to social aspects of their identities,

developed through their past and current experiences with academic writing, both in their mother tongue and in English, and also to exposure to discipline-specific English texts and discussions with other members of their disciplinary community.

It has become clear that the matter of appropriation of institutionally sanctioned rhetorical conventions has important consequences for emergent identities (also referred to as ‘writer voices’). Although the writing prompt required expressing a personal opinion about a controversial issue, the student-writers chose to employ the discursive resources which allowed them to hide their authorial identity, and/or to obfuscate authorial presence in the text by activating a depersonalized voice (D voice). It is clear then that Ukrainian and other student-writers do not feel legitimated by the discipline’s discourses or the institution to take a strong authorial stance and establish authority for the content of their writing. The discursal limitations restrict the students’ agentive power to search for new linguistic resources, from both L1 and L2, which could allow them to resist imposed writer identities and enable them to construct a unique writer voice.

CONCLUSIONS

The major implication of Lehman’s study for SLA theory is that the inequitable relations of power, that exist in the production of texts in an academic context, should be comprehensively reconsidered. From the analysis we can see that, in the vast majority of cases, L2 student-writers’ texts reveal a voice devoid of any individual input. Therefore, we argue that the opportunity for the L2 academic writer to negotiate her/his identity options in a tertiary-level institutional context, should be negotiated between the disciplinary community, represented by the instructor-assessor, and the student-writer. In this way, the unequal power relationship between the second language/second culture (L2/C2) and the first language and first culture (L1/C1) can be reduced, enabling students to gain, as Kramersch (2001) puts it, ‘a profit of distinction’, by using English in unique ways due to their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds.

Further research into the ways power relations influence the opportunities for self-expression in L2 users’ communities of practice (Wenger 2000) should be of a central concern to SLA theory and practice (Spolsky 1989). Therefore, pedagogical practices, involving such concepts as needs/rights analysis and critical EAP are important (see Benesch 2001; Kramersch 2001; Canagarajah 2002) as they help L2 learners to understand that when resistance to dominant discourses is noted and facilitated, this awareness of power relations can contribute to student-writers’ individual creativity in the production of texts.

To address the fact that the current SLA acculturation model does not give sufficient recognition to the multiple, conflictual and evolving identities of L2 writers, we suggest that L2 academic writers' cognitive and affective qualities should be theorized as social constructs to show how they intersect with students' authorial identities.

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