

Paying attention to identity in advanced EAP writing class

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Este artigo discute de que forma alunos de um curso de produção de textos em LE, em uma universidade particular na Cidade do México, se dão conta da escolha de diferentes identidades em uma atividade de escrita e como essa decisão pode auxiliá-los com relação à demanda do curso. Depois de abordar a questão da identidade em sala, de propor atividades com o propósito de desenvolver identidades sociais e de coletar uma amostragem de textos, os alunos foram questionados sobre a decisão de projetarem suas identidades nos textos, com o objetivo de descobrir se a compreensão da importância da identidade na redação acadêmica e a projeção dessa identidade nos textos facilitaria a escrita. Além disso, foi interessante avaliar se eles encontraram dificuldades de atender às exigências e convenções do texto em questão, ao estarem conscientes das possibilidades de construção de suas próprias identidades nesse mesmo texto.

The present article discusses how students in the advanced EAP (English as a foreign language) writing course at a private university in Mexico City become aware of choosing different identities in a written assignment, and how this decision can help them deal with the course requirements. After addressing the issue of identity in class and carrying out activities to develop social identities, and collecting samples of their writing, the students were questioned about their decision of projecting their identities in their papers in order to find out whether the understanding of the importance of identity in academic writing and its projection in their written essays would facilitate its writing. In addition, it was deemed interesting to learn about whether they found it easier to meet the demands and conventions of that particular essay by being aware of the possibilities of constructing their identities.

Attention has been paid to identity in first language writing by Clark and Ivanic (1997, p. 134), who claim that “writing cannot be separated from the writer’s identity”, and that anybody can bring an identity or identities to his or her writing, so any research in this area should take into account these four aspects. With respect to this, the way writers establish their identities has been researched with first language university students by Ivanic (1998). Her findings propose that in a writing class the four aspects of identity should be distinguished and the ways in which these interrelate should be discussed.

According to Ivanic (1998) there are four aspects of a writer's identity, which interrelate and overlap with each other in a written text, and which are always present when we write. Both novice and established writers can consciously, unconsciously or intuitively engage in the following:

1. Autobiographical self or its relation to the roots, and the background that writers can bring to their written production.
2. Discoursal self or its relation to the writers' voice, or the way they want themselves to be heard in their texts.
3. Self as author or how writers position themselves in relation to their readers with authority or tentativeness.
4. The multiple possibilities for selfhood or the social identities that writers perform in their text, or the different ways these social identities are constructed in any written text (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992; IVANIC, 1998). Social identities are ways "in which people identify themselves in relation to social groups, categories or stereotypes" (IVANIC, 1998, p. 14).

Identity has also been explored in second language writers. Ivanic and Camps (2001) studied the way Mexican students in postgraduate courses in England tried to develop a combination of different voices in their academic texts. Their findings provided pedagogical recommendations mainly consisting of raising awareness about voice so that students can keep control over the personal and cultural identity they are reflecting in their writing. Hirvela and Belcher (2001) focused their research on the role of voice in non-native mature students when writing academically in English. The students may be caught up in the struggle of having an authoritative and established voice so that they can become successful and accepted writers of the disciplines they want to be a part of in English-speaking academic communities. The authors' findings provide an understanding of how voice becomes a relevant part in writing which should be stressed in a second language composition class.

These aspects of identity (discoursal self and self as author) should then be taken into consideration when teaching second language composition (GRABE and KAPLAN, 1996). The issue of identity should be more fully addressed in composition courses (CAMPS, 2002). The reason

for ignoring it in writing and how it can be reflected in a text is due to the influence of post-process approaches which have given emphasis to cognitive aspects of writing rather than including the social aspect of writing as well (ATKINSON, 2003; MATSUDA, 2003). The social nature of writing is necessary to be taken into account if we are to have a better and ample perspective of writing; therefore, the development of identities in the students' academic writing should be considered important in both research and teaching of writing (CAMPS, 2002).

Starfield (2002), for instance, argues that the students' success in writing papers may depend on the ability to construct an authoritative self as author (to position themselves with authority or tentativeness) in their papers. However, in my view, the studies above mentioned have not provided enough recommendations on how identity should be taken into account in a writing class, neither have they specifically considered how the fourth aspect (possibilities for selfhood) should be brought up in a second language writing class. In addition, they have not fully examined the benefits that it can bring (CAMPS, 2002). Hence, this article discusses how the fourth aspect of identity (the writer's possibilities for selfhood) has been considered in the students of an advanced EAP writing class in Mexico City.

The study described in this article was carried out with the purpose of learning whether or not the teaching of the lesson on identity was useful for improving the students' writing. As an EAP teacher, I was interested in understanding the usefulness of addressing the issue of identity in a writing class, and in what ways it could really contribute to help the students' to write their essays by developing different social identities. The study also discusses the students' choices of their identities to produce an essay and presents some of the students' comments. Writers can construct their selfhood by making decisions about, among other things, the use of lexico-grammatical features, such as word choice and first, second or third singular/plural pronouns in the narrative. Once they construct their identities, they may quickly come to realize that these can be deemed as common and acceptable or uncommon and unacceptable by some academic communities, since they may or may not align with the conventions of these communities (IVANIC, 1998).

In a writing class, students should then become aware of the possibilities of constructing identities so that they can establish which

are the most convenient for them to use in order to meet the academic writing demands and the teacher's expectations. Teachers should clearly explain what the four aspects of identity are and its possibilities of projecting them in writing as well as its development. In this way, the students can understand how it can be projected into their writing, learn about the immense possibilities of what they can do and be, and be able to respond more easily to the academic conventions and requirements for writing papers. Therefore, teaching the students how to be able to develop their identities consciously and showing them the possibilities of selfhood becomes a very important aspect in the teaching of academic writing. EAP students in a writing class can understand their writing better and can follow more easily the conventions and fulfill the tasks and demands of academic writing.

I have divided this article into several sections. First, I write about the approach taken to gather and analyze the data. Then I describe the writing course: lessons, exercises, assignments and the students. After that, I focus on some of the students' comments about the identities developed in their papers along with some portions of their writing in order to comment on how some of its grammatical features in the text relate to the identities chosen. Finally, I draw my conclusions.

Description of the data collection

The purpose of gathering data was to learn whether the teaching of the lesson on identity was useful to improve the students' writing. And if it was useful, in what ways did it really contribute to develop their identities and meet the course demands to write essays. The data collection consisted mainly of one unstructured interview with each of the participants and one of their essays, so the students' comments referred to in this paper are drawn from the interview session.¹

The selection of the students to participate in the study is based on their written responses to a set of questions about the identity in the essay and on the way this identity was projected in the essays. Usually, in one academic year of two semesters I have five groups of 20 or 25 students.

¹ I conducted the interviews in Spanish, but I have translated them into English for quotation here.

So, I deemed necessary to delimit the number of participants up to four or five for each group by determining if these written responses match with the way their identity was projected in their essay. I then chose the participants for the interview on the basis of what I thought it was relevant to explore more in depth. Each of the interviews was carried out in one session during each semester. The questions were open-ended derived from what I sought to find out about how the participants developed their identities in the papers that I asked them to write.

I also take an interpretive approach to comment on the participants' responses to the interview questions in order to understand how the development of identity in their texts can help them with their writing (GREENE, 1990; SCHWANDT, 1994; DAVIS, 1995). I tried to grasp the meaning of the content of the students' responses about how they developed their identities. The interpretation of these responses is based on my own perceptions and concerns as a teacher for improving the students' writing, and my view of writing as a social practice (see CLARK and IVANIC, 1997, and CAMPS, 2000 for further discussion of this approach). The analysis of the transcriptions consisted of identifying the students' responses about their beliefs and views on the topic of the discussion of the lesson on identity, and the projection of identities in their writing. I also sought to determine how the findings could contribute to my teaching practice and how my own conclusions could be drawn.

The course and its students

The writing course is a genre-based course aimed at developing the students' writing of essays and formal letters by having activities to promote writing,² by raising awareness through class discussion of what they do in the writing process, and by looking at the conventions in an academic essay, so they can understand the social aspect of writing and deal with other sorts of writing in their content specific courses in English.³

² The students are first year undergraduate students from different disciplines with a TOEFL score ranging from 533 to 587. During their studies they take content-specific courses in English.

³ Some content-specific courses of the students' undergraduate studies are offered in English.

They also are encouraged to assume a position and project their identities at the moment of writing their papers. They come to the course without explicitly knowing that, every time they write, they can have the opportunity and possibility of being whoever they deem convenient. In this way, they can be an academic, politician, art critic, or simply a student without expertise in the topic they will write about, and can understand that their background and beliefs influence their views about what they discuss in their papers.

The students in the writing class are given the opportunity to develop the identity they think will meet their needs. First, they learn basic information about what identity is and how it can be constructed consciously. Then they do an exercise in which they have to choose a topic and write four paragraphs. In each paragraph the students are asked to develop a different identity, such as a teacher, a politician, an academic or any other they would like. In this last paragraph, for example, some choose the identity of a football player, or a house keeper, or a student. If time permits, we discuss the activity. Afterwards, we watch a movie or documentary. Then I ask them to write an essay with all the conventions we have seen: introduction with its main argument or thesis statement, development with four or six paragraphs (each one 10-15 lines long) revolving around the thesis statement, conclusion, and references in the text and in the sources section. As part of the requirements of this essay, the students have to develop the identities that will be the most relevant for them.

Students' comments about developing identities in their essay

In this section I refer to some of the comments of four students on identity along with my own interpretation. I also include, where necessary, some portions of the students' essay I asked them to write based on one of the movies or documentaries we watched in class.

Erick

The first student, Erick, wrote an essay about Jim Morrison. The reason for his choice was that one of the opening songs, *The End*, of the movie *Apocalypse Now* soundtrack was played by the rock band

The Doors. Since Erick liked their music very much, he decided to write about the song and its composers by assuming an identity of a Doors' fan. And since he thought he needed to refer to the lead singer's lifestyle, he decided to establish an identity of an observer as he did not want to make any criticisms against or in favor of Morrison.

...as a Doors' fanatic and an observer without any tendency in favor or against Morrison. There're some parts [in the essay] where it's seen [I am] in favor of his behaviors and the way he is... There are some parts where I use the first person, which is my point of view, and there are parts in the third person where I talk about Morrison's life.

On the one hand, we have Erick trying to assert an identity of someone very much connected with this sort of music, showing through his comments to be in favor of the band's music. On the other hand, we have Erick showing "impartiality" for the rock star's behavior. There are instances in the paper where he projects the identity of someone being neutral. His decision for showing both "impartiality" and favoritism in some parts of his work is reflected in the use of a combination of first and third person narration in the attempt of conciliating both positions. He achieves this by using the first person to refer to his own personal opinions and the third person to write about Morrison intending not to take part in any judgement.

The decision of having two identities was helpful to respond to the requirement of including references in the paper. According to Erick, he found it beneficial to have references to support his writing about The Doors, as these derived from his preference for rock music. In this way, the utilization of sources could not only help him develop the identity of an observer and a Doors' fan but also to be able to cover one aspect of the demands of his essay.

It was easy for me because I had quotes from Jim Morrison, which helped me to use quotations and articles of that time and you can see how people weren't used to those sorts of things.

Erick found a good way to include references to write about The Doors and their singer as a result of choosing the topic for his essay and developing his identities. He saw this as an opportunity to meet the requirement of incorporating references in his text and a sources section. He thought that having quotations properly cited would be the best way to support his discussion; consequently, it would facilitate the projection

of his identity as a Doors' fan and the fulfillment of one of the course requirements.

Maru

Maru wrote about a documentary we watched in class, the Branch Davidians and the incident in Waco, Texas. According to her, she decided to be a student in her paper because it would be easier to express an opinion without too much elaboration about how someone could manipulate the minds of others. Consequently, the information she had to look for in order to develop the discussion and her opinion would be simple. She said that if she had to project an identity of an academic, she would then have to look for more information, give more explanations and support her view on the subject. In this way, being a student would only provide basic information and would not have to go into details and analysis as probably an academic would, even though this identity could mean the possibility of not covering the course expectations of a more academic kind of paper.

I chose to be a student...I researched on his life, his actions and everything he formed, the church, to have something solid. As a student it's easier because if you're an academic or something like that you need to take [information] from more places and [give] more reasons.

When giving her opinion in the paper, Maru used both first person and third person narration. The reason for this combination of narratives was that she had been used to writing in the third person, and in this course she realized she could explain her thoughts better in the first person, so it was sort of a transition for her with these sorts of narratives in which she found herself using both first and third person.

I combine both the first and third [persons] ... What I wanted was to see how a person can manipulate the mind of others up to the point of death ... As a student is easier...the thing is that we were always used to talk in the third person... it's like the way you talk you write.

Being a student would facilitate writing Maru's opinion about something she disagreed with. And her identity as a student would also allow her to write in a more conversational or informal way in which she would avoid any formality or a more conventionally accepted sort of voice as it is found in more serious academic writing. However, the omission of other different types of identities in the essay reaffirms the

need for establishing identities related to academic writing so that the discussion and opinion expressed by the student could have been more formal and more convincing and the expectations of the course could have been completely fulfilled.

Enrique

Enrique wrote an essay about the behavior of the main characters in the movie *Apocalypse Now* and United States' role in their military intervention in Vietnam. He decided to write his paper adopting an identity of a student with knowledge in psychology.

I see myself as a student but with knowledge in psychology and tried to give my opinion from a psychological point of view although it may not be the best, but that was my intention.

He also wanted to have a critical position about the psychosis and anxiety in this military conflict and show empathy with the US soldiers fighting in Vietnam, since he thought they were victims of their country's military involvement and they didn't know why they were fighting.

Since there are altered behaviors with psychosis and anguish...I tried to explain the character's behavior from a psychological perspective... It's a critical position.

Assuming this identity in his paper helped Enrique to develop his ideas and discussion of those ideas because he knew what and how he wanted to communicate his position and views about the topic. He chose words related to psychology in order to engage in his discussion and project his identity. However, a problem he found by having the identity of a student with knowledge in psychology was the vocabulary he would use. As someone with certain knowledge in psychology, he had to use technical vocabulary. He knew it in Spanish and had to translate it into English and adapt it into his work. In the interview, he did not give any examples of his problem but as I looked through his paper I was able to find it when he writes:

As the movie has shown to us, in a state of war all the individuals present irregular *patrons of conduct*...

I have put in italics the words *patrons of conduct* to indicate where this kind of problem occurred. Enrique thought that this phrase, which he translated from the Spanish *patrones de conducta*, was a literal

translation, but he actually meant to say *behavior patterns*. Words like these were a problem for him in terms of clearly asserting his identity.

However, Enrique's decision did contribute to producing his paper and establishing his identity, because he was able to write at least 10-line paragraphs. Consequently, he responded to the requirement of having lengthy paragraphs.

Long paragraphs help develop the idea more, and it comes the time in which you are forced to develop your idea more and be more critical.

Usually, I ask my students to write longer paragraphs (from 10 to 15 lines) than they are normally used to, because I want them to learn to develop their argument in the introduction and have full discussion of that argument in the development part of their essay. In the case of Enrique, since he wanted to be someone with a more critical point of view about the topic, responding to the requirement of having a main argument and expressing it throughout, was not a problem, nor was it something he had to struggle with. On the contrary, it helped him to produce long paragraphs as he really wanted to reflect his views critically about something he was not in favor of. To do so, he had to elaborate his views in order to be completely sure that everything he wanted to be and say in his paper was clearly shown.

Jorge

Jorge wrote a paper based on the movie *Requiem for a Dream*. He wanted to be someone intellectual with an analytical and reflexive identity where he could provide a detailed analysis of the topic about drugs. The reason for his choice was that he believed young people, who have watched the movie, usually only see the use of drugs on the surface. He wanted to go beyond this by discussing obsessions and looking at how the characters in the movie destroyed their lives.

Analytical and reflexive identity... I think most of the people who have watched the movie, especially young people, only see drugs and sex superficially...I tried to go deeper and analyze the topic.

So he thought that the projection of these identities could assist him by having a discussion of the problem presented, and by analyzing this problem. Another aspect that influenced his decision was that he likes to be serious, organized and intellectual. This is reflected by the

way he structured his essay. First, he starts with a description of the movie. Then he has a long quotation in italics. And after that he has his discussion properly referenced throughout.

I cannot talk superficial ... I go deep. Besides the analysis I do a criticism and a proposal. To me the format and presentation and the sources section says a lot because I show I am organized and that I follow the instructions...

Jorge's personality (aspect one of the writer's identity), plus his decision to be reflexive and analytical (aspect four), is demonstrated in the way he wrote his paragraphs, which were lengthy. In these paragraphs we find reflections, opinion and analysis of the misuse of drugs. Obviously, the task of writing long paragraphs helped Jorge to construct his identity as he was able to write in more detail. Moreover, there is a combination of first person plural pronouns and an impersonal narrative that shows these identities. The former was used to provide personal comments and the latter to sound more formal, show criticism and reflection. He also asserts these identities of formality in the way he included the sources section. He wanted to show me that he followed the instructions I had given the class in order to write the essay.

Final Comments

The students in a writing course need to learn how to write in an academic way before they start to acquire knowledge related to their disciplines. The issue of identity becomes relevant for helping the students to accomplish this task. Students should become aware of the possibilities of having different identities in their texts and that these may help them to meet the requirements and formalities of academic papers. However, it is difficult to find the right ways of showing the students how they can construct these identities and how they can become aware of the fact that aspects of their identity, such as the social identities chosen, their personal history and view about the world or the topic they are referring to in a paper, influence their writing.

What the participants expressed about their identities in the text provides an understanding of the reasons for choosing them, and how this decision helps them to develop their identities and how these assist them to meet some of the course requirements of an essay. I could

understand why sometimes students do not want to get involved in more serious academic writing, although this could mean not meeting the teacher's expectations. I also was able to understand the reasons for having a more academic type of essay with its proper conventions or formalities and the fulfillment of the course requirements. However, as teachers we still have the great task ahead of finding ways for students to help themselves follow the requirements of discipline-specific courses, write essays in these disciplines and realize the importance of having identities accepted by the different discourse communities they interact with.

Besides the activities mentioned earlier in this paper, class discussions, together with writing activities, may be a good way to help our students to reflect on what they do and what they can be in their writing. Another way is to let the students imitate different sorts of voices they would like to represent. By realizing they can be anyone they feel or decide to be is a good possibility for helping them to meet academic demands and conventions, and to introduce them to their academic discipline, so they can deal with all the protocol in the academic, professional or business world when they graduate and start the next step of their lives.

In this article, I have only explored a small part of the immensity of what we can find out about identity and how we can help the students to be whomsoever they want. There is still much to do and look at. For instance, one possibility for research is to learn more about how we can address the issue of identity in writing courses to help the students in their content-specific courses in English. Another possibility for research is how Spanish affects students' identity at the moment of projecting it into English written texts. These are possible areas of research which can and should be explored in full.

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