

THE CONSTRUCTION OF WRITING IDENTITY: AN ANALYSIS IN DISSERTATION WRITING

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Abstract

The insights from studies on self-identity construction in writing have encouraged linguistics scholars to explore the presence of writers' identities in writing. Nevertheless, due to arguments whether second language writers construct their identity in writing since they are still in tension between fulfilling the writing's expectation and their English proficiency, a study that explores second language writing identity is needed. This study was conducted to explore how second-language writers construct their identities, particularly in academic writing. A dissertation written by an Indonesian doctoral candidate was chosen to be the main source of data. Adopting the work of Ivanic and Camps (2001), this study employed the three language functions proposed by Halliday, i.e. Ideational Function, Interpersonal Function, and Textual Function, as the analytical tools. Each function was broken down into specific features by which the texts were identified. Then, to sharpen the existence of writers' identity in writing, the findings were identified to find the manifestation of the four aspects of identity proposed by Ivanic (1998). The study found that the writer's identities were presented beyond the linguistic discourse employed in the writings. Regarding the manifestation of each function in the four aspects of writing identity, this study revealed that all aspects were manifested in the three language functions. It presents an argument that writing is the act of identity and even a second language writer constructs her writing identity including an academic one. Also, a second language writer establishes her own identity which conforms to the common convention in academic writing.

Keywords: Writing identity; second language writers; academic writing

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the notion of identity in writing has become noteworthy to investigate. Scholars like Hyland (2002), for example, have laid a claim that writing is not just a matter of how the ideas are structurally written. Rather, it is how a writer presents themselves that implies whether they commit to their ideas or not.

An effort to elaborate on what writers' identity in writing encourages Zawacki and Habib (2010) to investigate what writers' identity is. They are concerned what the meaning of being original in writing and writing using writers' voices (Zawacki & Habib, 2010). They found out that it was a hard task for multilanguage learners (non-native English speakers) to be original since they sounded merely copying and memorizing someone's ideas (Zawacki & Habib, 2010). It was assumed that multilanguage learners just put others' ideas as their references without positioning themselves whether they countered or aligned the ideas. The tension stimulates further studies that explore more critically what being original and using own voice when attributing others' ideas, particularly among multilanguage learners.

Several studies about writing identity have been conducted which more focus on the second language context. There is doubt for second language writers to bring out their identity in writing since they still dwell on their writing proficiency.

Some previous studies were conducted to see the notion of the writing identity of L2 writers. Shen (1989), in his work, revealed how he experienced a clash of identities when he was writing. Born as a Chinese speaker, he shaped himself to write in accordance with Chinese tradition which commonly was lack of confidence, showing modesty, and being communal. On the contrary, when he wrote an English composition, he insisted on being more assertive by using an “I” reference instead of “we”. Something uncommon, even rude, in Chinese tradition (Shen, 1989).

Nevertheless, a recent study carried out by Zhao (2019) about writer background and identity construction in L2 writing claimed that the writer’s background such as age, gender, cultural background, and level of exposure to the target language and culture, gave small impact to writing identity construction of L2 writers (Zhao, 2019). This implies that L2 writers also share their identity in writing despite their backgrounds. Also, there is the possibility that L1 writers and L2 writers share similar identities.

Furthermore, the occurrence of L2 writer identity, particularly in academic writing, is interesting to figure out. As we know, when we are producing academic writing, it is different from when we are writing novels or other literature products. Academic writing’s demands are more complex and precise. Hence, research in writing identity, particularly in the L2 context is prominent. It is worth knowing the tendency the L2 writers to construct their identity in writing. There is the possibility that they share common constructions, which might intentionally occur or another possibility is that they perform different construction.

An interesting study linked to L2 writing identity and academic writing was conducted by Hyland (2002). He assumed that the way writers committed to their ideas was regarded as constructing writing identity. In this case, he mentioned establishing an authorial identity. Hyland argued that authorial identity was apparent rhetorically by the use of personal pronouns and determiners. By analyzing the undergraduate L2 writers’ report, he found that the personal pronoun “I” was underused among L2 writers. The lack of confidence to state their arguments, writers’ mindset about objectivity in academic writing, and collective cultural identity respectively played important roles in determining whether L2 writers avoided using the singular pronoun “I” (Hyland, 2002).

Due to the findings of Hyland's study (2002) that L2 writers underused the personal pronoun "I" in academic texts rather than in nonacademic ones implies the awareness of L2 writers towards constructing self-identity in writing. It means the notion of identity is a common matter including in second language writing context. Indeed, this awareness also indicates that L2 writers have not fulfilled the English writing demands by which L2 writers feel discouraged from being more assertive by using the personal pronoun "I". Also, it impressed L2 awareness to make academic writing sound impersonal by avoiding the "I". This situation commonly occurs among L2 writers.

Besides, trying to compare Indonesian writers and non-Indonesian writers in constructing their identity in academic writing, Afandi and Roselani (2024) found the facts that being L2 writers, Indonesian writers shared particular characteristics in their writing. Using the framework of Hyland's stance categories (Hyland, 2002), it was found that Indonesian writers had a tendency to use hedges, which indicates that Indonesian writers avoid overgeneralization, acknowledge different views, and respect the readers' opinions, particularly in findings and discussion parts (Afandi & Roselani, 2024).

Also, research conducted by McKinley (2017) revealed that the L2 writers, the Japanese university students, manifested writing identity following Ivanič's (1998) framework, namely autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as an author, and possibilities for self-hood. However, the students manifested those aspects as a matter of fulfilling the instructors' expectations. It is seen from this study that the students were eager to become proficient academic English writers, striving to live up to the standards set by their instructors. The important point to consider is the instructors did not specifically address writing identity in class. The instructors claimed the most important for students is to focus on how they are more practical in completing the writing tasks rather than concerning themselves with the issue of writing identity (McKinley, 2017).

To get a deeper understanding of writing identity, Ivanič and Camps (2001) investigated writers' voices. The writer's voice that they emphasized has a link to the way writers position themselves throughout writing (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Adopting the Halliday framework about three macro-functions of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013), as cited in Ivanič & Camps (2001), namely Ideational Function, Interpersonal Function, and Textual Function, Ivanič and Camps clarified how L2 writers presented themselves lexically and syntactically. They noted that in every single piece of writing,

writers, try to present themselves, even L2 writers, which had not fulfilled the English writing standard (Ivanič & Camps, 2001).

To discuss writing identity, the four aspects of identity proposed by Ivanic (1998), namely autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as an author, and possibilities for self-hood (p. 24) are significant to consider. The following are brief descriptions of the four aspects of identity proposed by Ivanic.

The first aspect is the Autobiographical Self. This aspect indicates how writers write in a certain way they do (Ivanič, 1998). This is closely related to writers' backgrounds and writers' habits in the context of the way they write certain texts.

The second aspect is the Discoursal Self. This aspect refers to common discourse characteristic of particular writing (Ivanič, 1998). This study adopted what has been done by Ivanic (1998) and Ivanic and Camps (2001) in which writers aligned with lexical and grammatical choices (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Besides, this aspect concerns how the language used in writing relates to values, beliefs, and power in the social context in which the texts are written (Ivanič, 1998).

The third is the Self as Author. This aspect concerns writers' positions, opinions, and beliefs in their writing (Ivanič, 1998). To figure out the sense of writers' authority, the way writers attribute others' ideas and the way writers claim, suggest, and argue something is analyzed.

The fourth aspect is the possibilities for self-hood. Constructing possibilities for selfhood as a member of an academic community brings the effect of possibilities that writers contributed to the establishment of particular conventions. In addition, being a member of an academic community might affect the homogeneity or heterogeneity in language use (Ivanič, 1998).

By analyzing some academic essays written by her co-researchers who were English Native Speakers and emphasizing the aspect of discoursal self which was interconnected with other aspects, Ivanic (1998) depicted that writers manifested their life-history into their writing and they had discoursal choices which brought consequences the heterogenetic even in the same discourse community. Furthermore, writers might share similar characteristics of language features associated with the sense of self-hood (Ivanič, 1998).

Some evidence has been presented to support the facts that L2 writers reveal their identities. Therefore, further study using certain contexts is needed to generate more insights into how writers construct their identities through writing. A context in which L2 writers

compose academic writing as well, with more complex written discourse and more demanding instructions, such as doctoral dissertations is challenging to explore. In the frame of this context, research was conducted to find out how L2 writers construct their identity in academic writing adopting the three language functions proposed by Halliday (2013), namely Ideational Function, Interpersonal Function, and Textual Function, as cited in Ivanic & Camps (2001) and to find out how L2 writers' constructions of identity are manifested in the four aspects of writing identity by Ivanic (1998) namely autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for self-hood. However, the research focused on the writers' identity which was implicitly asserted in the analyzed writing products despite the writers' life background and outside situations that influence the process of writing.

RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative method was implemented as the research method. This research is considered a text analysis since the writing products, in this case, the doctoral dissertation, mainly become the analyzed text.

The source of the data was taken from a Doctoral Dissertation written by a student of English Applied Linguistics at a private university in Jakarta. The dissertation was picked to be the textual source of this research. It was obtained from the university library database. The Dissertation was written by A.M (writer's initial name), entitled " Investigating the Language Use in Public Sign: Study of Linguistic Landscape in Jakarta".

The Doctoral Dissertation was selected to get a factual illustration of writing products in a second language learners' context. Since the second language learning competency in writing remains in debate, it is assumed that dissertation writers have already achieved high competency in the field of study they are concerned about and in language use. Therefore, despite considering the language writing competency of the writer, the analysis of the writer's identity in writing was conducted. Besides, the findings of the present research do not influence the quality level of the dissertation, since this project is merely for scientific purposes.

To gain the first objective of this study, text analysis was conducted to know the presence of three language functions in the text. The Ideational Function was analyzed through the presence of how writers associated themselves with their interests, objects of study, and methodologies; and how writers positioned themselves towards topics: values, beliefs, and preferences. In the first section, the extracts were analyzed to find out the linguistic characteristics that implied writers' interests through the particular terminology

related to the topic discussed. In the second section of how writers position themselves towards topics, a specific feature is employed, i.e. the use of passive form.

The Interpersonal Function is revealed by the power relationship that exists between writers and readers. There are some possibilities that might occur whether writers put themselves: as the opinion holders (Tang & John, 1999), equal to the readers, or lesser than the readers.

The third function is the Textual Function. It observed the writing based on the physical appearance of the writing product including how they displayed the text and paralinguistic features which appeared (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). The paralinguistic features can be the letter font, the use of capital letters for particular terms, and the use of brackets to show specialty.

After coding the extracts based on the language functions above, the finding extracts and their analysis were observed to seek out how they manifested the four aspects of identity by Ivanič (1998), namely autobiographical self, discursal self, self as an author, and possibilities for self-hood. Each aspect had particular values to emphasize on. Therefore, the reflection here was a process to reveal how the three language functions supported constructing writers' identities based on the four aspects.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Referring to the first research question, this study finds out the extent of features by which writers' identities are revealed. Adopting the work of Ivanič and Camps (2001), this study also employed the three macro functions of language by Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) as the analytical tools. Each function was described using related features by which the discursal choices were analyzed.

Ideational Function

In the case of Ideational Function, writers employed particular terminology that corresponded to their topics. This became a means for writers to note their interests and knowledge of the topic. However, the lexical choices were not only in the scope of related terminology but also particular words and phrases that were considered to support the discussion.

Extract 1 AM – Linguistic Landscape (Chapter 5, p.132, lines 1 – 8)

The third group is bilingualized signs. In Prapatan, there are six sub-categories of the bilingualized signs:

Bilingualized signs that contain **code-mixing**, Bilingualized signs that contain **English borrowing**, Bilingualized signs that contain **Indonesian borrowings**, Bilingualized signs that contain **English borrowing and English idiosyncrasies**, Bilingualized signs that contain code-mixing and English borrowing, Bilingualized signs that contain **code switching**

From Extract 1, I found some terms that commonly occur in sociolinguistic studies, such as *code-mixing*, *English borrowing*, *English idiosyncrasies*, and *code-switching*. However, in this context, those common terms become specific since they are related to *bilingualized signs* as the topic discussed.

Also, in this function, how the writer positions herself toward topics was revealed by analyzing the preference to employ the passive forms.

Extract 2 AM – Linguistic Landscape (Chapter 5)

- a. **Commercial roads** within each of the five administrative towns in Jakarta **have been selected** to be the research areas. The study focuses only on commercial signs where **English are commonly found** (p.91)
- b. **Kecamatan Senen is zoned** for national and regional government, small to middle-sized houses, apartments, offices, trade and service centers, miscellaneous zone **which is aimed** for high-rise buildings for housings and offices, social services (p.92)
- c. **The non-displayed content will be represented by three dots within pointy brackets** < . . . >. In the end, there will be a summary of the characteristics of English in which **the frequency of each type of the sign is presented**. In that regard, **all incidents of monolingual, bilingual, and bilingualized signs and its sub-categories will be calculated**, regardless of the fact that some signs belong to the same establishment (p.127 - 128)
- d. With regard to MEC sector, there were three signs: one tire repairer, a car wash, and a WC siphon. In general, **the three establishments are commonly seen** on big streets in Jakarta. Probably that is because **the first two establishments are needed by the passers-by using vehicles**. Meanwhile, signs of HEA consist of two massage service. Typically **those signs are written** on small stickers glued to walls, fence or electricity poles or boards. (p.93)

The first two extracts (2a and 2b) of AM's Dissertation have a similarity in that they are agentless. Those extracts merely illustrate many other sentences that frequently occur in AM's Dissertation. Both sentences emphasize the affected phenomenon rather than the (unknown) agents. The first extract (2a) indicates how the writer puts her position as "unknown agent" since she wants to convey that the important message is the "commercial roads". She may write "I have selected commercial roads within each of the five administrative towns in Jakarta to be the research areas", however, she prefers to use passive form to catch readers' attention towards the affected phenomenon. Whereas, the second extract (2b) implies a more general statement. Since the context is seen, that the agent is the province government, passive voice is preferable to emphasize the affected subject.

The third extract (2c) describes particular procedures. I assumed that AM kept a value that she wanted to provide the readers with clear procedures within the passive subject. Hence, she employed the passive form in "The non-displayed content will be represented by three dots within pointy brackets" instead of the active one "The three dots within pointy

brackets will represent the non-displayed content”. Also, the following passive forms, “... is presented” and “... will be calculated”, both of which are agentless, have shown the importance is the passive subjects.

Meanwhile the fourth extract, (2d) “the three establishments are commonly seen on big streets in Jakarta” and “those signs are written on stickers”, clearly shows that the writer did not have to add the agents since the agents were not necessarily mentioned.

Interpersonal Function

The extent of interpersonal relationships between writers and readers also aligns with how writers show their authoritative voices in their writing. The authoritative voices, according to Ivanic and Camps (2001), are manifested in some manners and the very typical manner is the use of the first personal pronoun which has been previously discussed, and particular personal references. The discussion seems to overlap, however this subsection focuses on how the first personal pronouns affect the power relationship between writers and readers.

Extract 3 AM – Linguistic Landscape

p. 127

As **I** have previously mentioned in chapter 4, the use of English on public signs in the five areas is categorized into three.

p. 201

In this section, **I** will discuss the differences and similarities between the present and previous study by Backhaus (2007), Bruyel-Olmedo & Juan-Garaub (2009), Huebner (2006), and Manan et al. (2015)

By looking at Tang and John’s (1999) study on the use of the first personal pronoun, particularly the “I”, the illustration from AM’s Dissertation pointed to the role of the pronoun “I” as the architect of the essay (Tang & John, 1999). In that illustration, being the writer, AM was in charge of presenting her writing, including organizing the structure of the text. The use of “I” in the sentences “As I have previously mentioned” and “In this section, I will discuss ...” exhibited her authority towards the presentation of the writing. As a consequence, readers acted as the “recipient”. It meant that readers merely read the writing, and they did not have any responsibility towards the text contents or the writer’s idea.

Textual Function

In her Dissertation, AM inserted many figures of Linguistic Landscapes and used tables to display the results of her findings. I considered that AM’s decision to insert the figures was the best way to provide readers with sufficient descriptions of the Linguistic Landscape that

occurred in particular areas. Besides, the use of tables to deliver the findings was very effective in creating organized and structured data.

Four Aspects of Writing Identity

After finding out how the writer's identities are constructed using the framework of three language functions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013), the findings are analyzed to see how the four aspects of writing (Ivanič, 1998) are manifested.

Based on the findings, all aspects were manifested in each function, but in different degrees of appearance. It means that the aspects might occur in the functions or they need supporting information outside the main text. In terms of the aspect of the Autobiographical Self and Self as Author, it was not strongly manifested in the Textual Function. The fact had proven that the aspect needed additional information that reveals the writer's personal and writing background instead of the writing product.

The Autobiographical Aspect is manifested in each function. The writer's background surely influenced "the act of writing" (Ivanic, 1998). Particularly in the Ideational Function, the writer's interests were shown based on the choice of their Dissertation topic. Although, it was still a very open possibility since there was no exact data from the writer who stated that way. Meanwhile, in the case of Interpersonal Function, I considered the writer's opinions and commitments influenced her relationship with readers. The opinions and commitments were the output of writers' backgrounds which was probably maintained from her past up to recent times. Similarly, in the case of Textual Function, the writer's consideration to display a particular mode might be regarding their experience.

Concerning the Discoursal-Self Aspect, I figured out that there was evidence of how values, beliefs, and power relationships occur in the Discoursal choices in writing. The lexical, syntactical, and display mode choices represented a kind of writer's values, beliefs, and power relationship. For instance, the sense of being an academic writer had led her to be more impersonal rather than personal. Therefore, she tended to avoid the "I" and employ agentless passive forms to gain impersonality and objectivity.

Referring to the Aspect of Self as Author, the manifestation occurred in the Ideational and Interpersonal Function, but it was not significantly present in Textual Function. The way the writer employed the "I" as the subject and aligned with others' ideas is evidence of how she "saw and presented herself as author" (Ivanič, 1998). The sense of authoritativeness existed when she confidently presented herself as "I". It indicates that she was fully in charge of the particular claim and experience as well. Also, when aligning with others' ideas, I saw

that the writer had acted her role as the “authority holder” since she had equally put herself with others’ by providing her voice.

The fact of being part of the academic community has influenced the writer to employ what has become the prototypical identity among academic writers. Hence, the Possibilities for Selfhood are manifested. The writer employed common academic writing conventions including attributing others’ ideas (Ideational Function), the self-reference “I” (Interpersonal Function), and conventional academic generic structure (Textual Function). Those features shaped the self-hood among writers and significantly they contributed to the establishment of those features as part of the Possibilities for Selfhood in the academic community.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The three functions of language have accommodated the analysis of the identity constructions. It revealed that the Dissertation Writer constructed her characteristics. In the case of Ideational Function, I viewed what was presented in the Dissertations including the topic, the terminologies, the noun choices, the stock of words, the sentence structure, and the way writers aligned with others’ ideas associated with the writer’s interests, values, and beliefs (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). The writer intended to show her interests, values, and beliefs as the recognition of others towards what she was writing and who she was.

In the case of Interpersonal Function, based on the findings I concluded that second language writers were keen on staying in their comfort zone by avoiding the “I” subject. Thus, the writer sets less power relationships with readers. Besides, in the case of Textual Function, unfortunately, there was no exact evidence of why particular modes were displayed. However, no matter what lay beyond, the text’s physical appearance also contributed to constructing the writer’s identity since each writer had a different textual appearance.

Regarding the Four Aspects of Writing Identity by Ivanic (1998), I concluded that those aspects were manifested in the writer’s identity constructions. The Autobiographical Aspects were manifested in the existence of the writer’s interests, values, and beliefs which corresponded to the writer’s background. The Discoursal-Self Aspect was manifested in the discoursal choices which described the writer’s values, beliefs, and power relationship. Meanwhile, the Self as Author Aspect was represented in the way the writer attributed others’ ideas and provided significant claims as well. Also, the sense of having social selfhood was shown by the prototypical conventions that were employed among academic writers.

Finally, based on the three language function writing constructions and the manifestations of the four writing identity aspects, I prove that writing exactly reflects the writer's identity. It follows a claim that identity is always present in writing (Williams, 2006) and Ivanič's statement that writing is an act of identity (Ivanič, 1998). This study also provides significant evidence that being a second language writer, she also constructs her identity in writing through the presentation of lexical, syntactical, grammatical, and other discourse choices. There are always particular backgrounds and intended meanings for why the writer employs certain features.

Therefore, it is very important to encourage second-language writers to be aware not only of their writing proficiency but also of their own writing identity. Recently, writers are getting to be freer, and more confident to establish their own identity in writing, including in academic writing. It seems that learners' attitudes towards academic writing are more open (Tang, 2006). It means that writers are "more aware of their demeanors, personalities, and stances that they convey through writing" (Tang, 2006). However, they are still staying in the circle of the academic writing community by which particular prototypical writing conventions are maintained. Then, their writing identity becomes valuable contributions to enhance the quality and characteristics of their writing.

Furthermore, the study brings new insight into the teaching of writing in ESL. By knowing the presence of Interpersonal Function, for instance, teachers may know the students' tendency how reveal their self-assurance. Thus, teachers should provide feedback on the student's writing that conveys, for instance, whether they should try to employ any first personal pronouns and be critical in employing modal verbs such as *may* or *must*. This would bring the students to a new mindset of the way they write.

Second, teachers should develop a writing assessment rubric that accommodates the writers' identity. Teachers should avoid employing a kind of "writing policy" which is considered to limit their students to construct writing identity. Consequently, teachers should not only keep on pushing the students to fulfill basic "mechanical writing criteria" (Tang, 2006) including developing thesis statements, writing cohesive paragraphs and employing correct grammar and punctuation, and proper citation, but should also heighten students' awareness of their self-identity in writing.

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