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Exploring Writer Identity in Mexican EFL Students' Academic Writing^{*1}

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El objetivo de este estudio fue explorar la identidad autorial en los textos en inglés de estudiantes universitarios mexicanos de Lingüística Aplicada. Analizamos el uso de pronombres en primera persona y la forma en la que los participantes conceptualizaban su identidad como autores de sus ensayos. Empleamos una combinación de análisis textual y entrevista basada en discurso. Los resultados indican que los participantes que hicieron un uso amplio de los pronombres en primera persona los emplearon para presentar experiencias personales más que para proyectar una identidad autorial fuerte. En cambio, los que hicieron poco uso de estos pronombres proyectaron una identidad autorial más fuerte a través del empleo de una variedad de recursos lingüísticos. El uso de pronombres en primera persona no es esencial en el desarrollo de una identidad autorial fuerte. La educación superior debería proporcionar mayores oportunidades y recursos para que los estudiantes aprendan a proyectar una presencia autorial fuerte en los textos académicos que redactan en inglés.

Palabras clave: identidad de escritor, análisis textual, pronombres, escritura académica, escritura en inglés como lengua extranjera.

The objective of this study was to explore writer identity in Mexican undergraduate students of Applied Linguistics writing in English. We focused on the participants' use of first person pronouns and the ways in which they conceptualized their identity as authors of their essays. We employed a combination of text analysis and discourse-based interview methodologies. Findings indicate that participants that made ample use of first person pronouns employed them to present personal experiences rather than to project a strong authorial self. By contrast, those who made little use of first person pronouns seemed to project stronger authorial selves by employing a broader range of stylistic choices. The use of first person pronouns is not essential in the development of strong authorial selves. Higher education should provide better opportunities and resources for students to learn how to project a strong authorial presence in the academic texts they write in English.

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1 This article is based on a presentation in the 3.^{er} Foro Nacional de Estudios en Lenguas (Fonael) at Universidad de Quintana Roo, México, in October, 2010. It is part of an on-going study about Academic writing in English as a second language in Mexican higher education.

Key words: writer identity, text analysis, pronouns, academic writing, EFL writing.

L'objectif de cette étude fut celui d'explorer l'identité des étudiants universitaires Mexicains de Linguistique Appliquée, en tant qu'auteurs de textes en anglais. Nous avons analysé l'utilisation de pronoms en première personne et la forme dont les participants ont conceptualisé leur identité en tant qu'auteurs de ces essais. L'emploi d'une combinaison d'analyse textuelle et d'entretiens basée sur le discours. Les résultats montrent que les participants ayant utilisé amplement les pronoms en première personne ont fait cet exercice plus pour présenter des expériences personnelles, que pour projeter une forte identité d'auteur. En revanche, ceux qui les ont utilisés moins, ont projeté une identité d'auteur forte à travers l'utilisation d'une variété de ressources linguistiques. L'utilisation de pronoms en première personne n'est pas essentielle pour le développement d'une identité d'auteur forte. Il faudrait que l'éducation supérieure offre plus d'opportunités et de ressources afin que les apprenants projettent une plus forte présence d'auteur dans les textes qu'ils écrivent en anglais.

Mots-clés: identité d'auteur, analyse textuelle, pronoms, écriture académique, écrire en anglais comme langue étrangère.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of writer identity refers to different selves writers use when they write (Hyland, 2001). In every text writers can create a variety of selves or identities through a combination of linguistic choices. Contrary to what we may think, identity is not a fixed entity possessed by the writer and expressed through language. Writers may create different identities and change real or imagined identities imposed by their discourse situations using language as a resource (Cherry, 1988).

Researchers have explored the different ways in which writers present themselves in their texts (Cadman, 1997; Cherry, 1988; Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Hyland, 2002a; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Weldon, 1999; Shen, 1989). They claim that writer identities are partly constrained by the dominant ideologies of privileged literacies, and partly open to the writers' interpretations of these constraints as a result of their personal and sociocultural experiences (Hyland, 2002b). Writer identities are directly related to the choices writers make in their discourses.

Studying writer identity is complex; it involves untangling a multitude of layers in the text. In an effort to approach writer identity in an analytical

way, Clark and Ivanic (1997) distinguished three aspects of identity that writers bring to any act of writing. One of such aspects that writers create is the *autobiographical self*, influenced by their personal life-history, opinions and beliefs about the ideas on the text. Writers also create the *discoursal self*, used to claim membership to a group with whom they share practices and discourses. Finally, writers create the *authorial self*, which manifests itself as authoritativeness in relation to the contents of the text.

In relation to the *authorial self*, there are several ways for writers to be, or appear to be, relatively authoritative and to bring their authorial presence into their writing. The textual features associated with authorial presence include: 1) whether or not writers use the first person pronouns, and 2) if writers do use first person pronouns, whether it is for structuring the essay, for presenting personal experience and/or for making statements of value or belief (Clark & Ivanic, 1997). Although the three uses of first person pronouns are desirable in students' essays, it is the third kind, making statements of value or belief, which seems more difficult to use by second language learners who are becoming part of a disciplinary discourse community.

Writer identity has been investigated in the discourse of dissertations (Cadmán, 1997; Hyland, 2004b); scientific research articles of different disciplines written in English (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999), and in other languages (Vassileva, 1998; 2000); undergraduate student project reports (Hyland, 2002); and undergraduate essays (Tang & John, 1999). However, the ways in which novice student writers in Spanish-speaking countries who take university content courses in English as a foreign language (EFL) develop a sense of identity in their academic essay writing has been underexplored in academic literacy research.

This study aims to investigate the identities constructed by eight Mexican undergraduate students of Applied Linguistics, writing course essays in English. Specifically, the study examines the frequency and discourse functions of the pronoun "I".

1.1 Academic writing and authorial identity

This study is based on the notion that language is not only a means to convey information from one person to another, but also a means to interact and relate to others in a specific context (Hyland, 2004a; 2005). Texts, therefore, consist of a propositional content level and a writer-reader level. The propositional content level refers to events, actions or objects outside the text, while the writer-reader level is that in which the writer comments on the organization of the text itself, or reacts to the propositional material in the text (Vande, 1985).

At both text levels, the propositional and interactional ones, writers can make their presence visible to the reader, in varying degrees. However, it is at the writer-reader level of the text where the writer constructs an *authorial self*, one of the aspects of writer identity that has to do with whether the writer is present in the writing with a strong authorial voice or not; whether the author is saying *something* with authority or not (Clark & Ivanic, 1997). It is this element of identity, the authorial self, which we focus on in this study. We are interested in exploring the degree of authoritativeness that writers display in their texts.

Writers differ in how much they represent themselves as authors (not only writers) with authority to say something. By making their presence visible to their readers, writers construct a notion of self in the text. This self is not a fixed aspect of reality reflected on the language used by the writer. Instead, the self is constantly being created by the language the writer uses.

According to Clark and Ivanic (1997), writers construct their identities from the culturally available discourses in the sociocultural context. These discourses provide writers with ways of interpreting the world and representing themselves that are linked to the practices and structures of specific social communities. When a community's practice and discourse are adopted, such community's perspectives and interpretations are also adopted and the writer's identity as a member of that community develops.

One of the most obvious and important ways in which writers can represent themselves to readers is by explicitly affirming their role in discourse through first person pronouns (Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999). The pronoun "I" helps writers establish a commitment to their words and set up a relationship with their readers. First person subject is the most powerful means by which writers express an identity.

Writers use first person reference differently in terms of frequency and in terms of the functions that the first person reference performs. This variability is related to such aspects as writers' status (professionals or students); proficiency in the language in which they write (native or non-native writers of English); their cultural background (Finish, Dutch or French writers); the writing situation (educational or work setting); the topic and purpose of the text (giving an opinion or reporting research results); or the disciplinary community (mechanical engineering or psychology).

Authorial pronouns are important pragmatic features of academic writing because they help writers construct their texts and construct their scholarly identities. Pronouns play a crucial role in mediating the relationships between the writers' arguments and their discourse communities. Writers can create an identity as both members of a disciplinary community and as persuasive creators of ideas through self-mention.

Research on the use of first person in academic writing has yielded several taxonomies of personal reference. The three most frequently used taxonomies to analyze research articles, dissertations, and student course papers were developed by Hyland (2002a), Clark and Ivanic (1997), and Tang and John (1999). As Table 1 shows, all three taxonomies revolve around issues of authorial presence and discourse functions. They differ, however, in terms of the number of categories they include, the type of text they were designed for, and the focus of the categories. Comparing the frameworks, we conclude that the taxonomy by Tang and John (1999) includes too many categories, which make it difficult to use. The framework by Hyland (2002), on the other hand, is appropriate for research articles rather than for student essays or other type of academic texts. The taxonomy proposed by Clark

and Ivanic (1997) is economical and focuses on clear discourse functions rather than on metaphorical labels (e.g. guide, architect). Careful consideration of these issues needs to be done before adopting these instruments to analyze the use of personal reference in academic writing.

Table 1 Comparison of taxonomies for the discourse functions of personal reference		
Tang and John (1999)	Hyland (2002)	Clark and Ivanic (1997)
<i>I as...</i>	<i>I for...</i>	<i>I for...</i>
representative of a larger group of people	stating a purpose	structuring the essay
guide through the essay	explaining a procedure	presenting personal experience
architect of the essay	stating results/claims	making statements of value or beliefs
recounter of the research process	expressing self-benefits	
opinion holder	elaborating an argument	
originator of ideas and knowledge		

1.2 Studies on first person pronoun use by student writers

Studies on writer identity and first person pronoun use focus on texts produced by student writers (Tang and John, 1999), on the comparison of texts produced by expert writers with those produced by student ones (Hyland, 2002c) or on texts produced by native and non-native writers of English (Martínez, 2005).

Tang and John's (1999) study of authorial pronouns focused on the texts of student writers. They examined the use of first person pronouns in the essays of 27 first-year students of an *English in Context* course in a university of Singapore. Students were asked to complete a 1000-word essay explaining a given quotation, using material taught on the course. The researchers examined the essays to determine if the students used first person pronouns in their essays and to ascertain the roles behind these first person references. They coded each occurrence of first person pronoun with one of the following categories for the use of "I": 1) representative (of a larger group of people); 2) guide through the essay; 3) architect of the essay; 4) recounter of the research process; 5) opinion holder; and 6) originator (of ideas and knowledge).

Results of the study by Tang and John (1999) indicated that a fairly large percentage of the students (81%) did use the first person pronouns in their writing. The highest number of the occurrences of the pronoun was “I” as Representative (39%) and “I” as Guide of the essay (31%). In few instances, the student writers presented themselves as Opinion holders (4%) or as Originators of ideas (5%). None of the students used “I” to Recount the research process (0%).

Tang and John (1999) concluded that presenting themselves as originators of their own ideas and opinions to their tutors and lecturers for evaluation is an intimidating process for students. However, the researchers found, through the use of interviews, that students had the preconceived notion that academic writing should be distant and impersonal. The researchers concluded that writing courses in university programs should include issues on writer identity, and that students' attention should be drawn to the language choices available to present themselves in their writing.

In a comparative study, Hyland (2002c) interviewed expert writers and examined 240 published journal articles, 30 from each of eight disciplines, to examine the use of first person pronouns. He compared the results with those obtained from 48 project reports written by final-year Hong Kong undergraduate students in six fields. Results indicated that expert writers in hard sciences and Engineering preferred to downplay their personal role to highlight the issue under study, while the stronger identity was claimed in the Humanities' and Social Sciences' papers. Students, in contrast, underused writer pronouns and used them to refer to their texts rather than to their ideas. Only 12 author pronouns per essay were used in the student corpus, compared to 22 in experts' texts. Disciplinary variations were largely absent in students' texts.

Again, Hyland (2002c) found that many students in his study believed that “I” and “we” were inappropriate in academic writing, and that opinions should not be brought into the text. In addition, many of the Chinese students felt uncomfortable with the personal authority that the use of “I” implied because they valued more collectivist forms of self-representation.

Another study compared the use of personal reference of native and non-native writers of English language (Martínez, 2005) in Biological Sciences articles published in 14 journals (1.070.681 words) and research articles written by Argentinean students (36.927 words). In addition to text analysis, a survey was used with the non-native writers. Results indicated that while native writers of English had highest concentrations of first person pronouns in the Discussion and Results sections, non-native writers of English used them in all sections and in higher percentages than native writers of English. This contrasted with the results of the survey in which the non-native writers had reported that they considered inappropriate to use first person pronouns in academic writing.

This study aims to contribute to the body of literature by using text analysis and discourse-based interview methodologies to explore the writer identity of undergraduate students of Applied Linguistics writing in English as a Foreign Language. It examines the use of first person pronouns in Applied Linguistics students' essays, and the ways in which they conceptualize their identity as authors of their course papers. Specifically, the study was developed to respond to the following research questions:

1. How do student writers use first person pronouns in their argumentative essays?
2. How do student writers create identities through the use of first person pronouns?

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were eight first-year undergraduate students of Applied Linguistics, one instructor, one interviewer, and a debriefer at a Mexican university. The undergraduates were four male and four female students, all native speakers of Spanish, aged 19 to 35. Three participants were English language instructors and the rest were students. Prior to the beginning of the study, the course instructor conducted an informal class

survey to find out participants' previous experiences with academic writing. They reported that they had never written essays before the study took place, neither in English nor in Spanish. However, they had taken an institutional English proficiency examination equivalent to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for the Learning, Teaching and Evaluation of Languages. Six of the students obtained a grade "B" while two students had a grade "C" on the exam.

The instructor of the course was also the designer of the study and the first author of this article. The second author carried out the interviews and coded both essays and transcripts. The third author coded essays and transcripts, and acted as a peer debriefer.²

2.2 Pedagogical context

The context of the study was a "Culture and Globalization" course which was compulsory for all undergraduate students. Although this course was taught in Spanish across the university, the medium of instruction in this course was English, as in all the courses in the Applied Linguistics Program. The objectives of the course were 1) to look closely at the debates that surround the terms "culture" and "globalization"; 2) to explore how globalization impacts language use and language teaching. Students met once a week for two hours to read, discuss and write on the contents of the course.

The face-to-face sessions of the course took the form of seminars, where students were expected to participate actively in each of the learning activities. Students met once a week for two hours to discuss and write on the contents of the course. The reading materials used were obtained from a variety of sources such as book chapters, research papers, and theoretical articles. Students were also expected to read the materials in advance so they were prepared to participate in a critical analysis of both the contents

2 Peer debriefing is the process of exploring aspects of the inquiry that may otherwise remain implicit in the inquirers' mind. The task of the debriefer is to probe the inquirer's bias, explore different meanings of data and clarify interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process keeps the research honest.

and the stylistic features of texts during class sessions. The course had a strong emphasis on helping students to develop academic writing abilities. Students were given opportunities to analyze the discourse features contained in the course's reading materials. They also engaged in self, peer and instructor feedback on draft assignments.

During the course, participants were required to write two essays of 1.250 and 1.500 words. The first encapsulated writing prompt was: How does globalization impact cultural identity? The second encapsulated writing prompt was: How does language education in Mexico reflect cultural diversity and cultural homogenization? The essays were collected at the middle and at the end of the course.

Given the short amount of contact hours of the course and the exploratory nature of the study, no special treatment, training or preparation was given to the students. Instructions for essay writing were given in written form.

2.3 Data collection procedures

The sources of data for this study were 16 argumentative essays submitted by participants for course evaluation, and 8 discourse-based interview transcripts. The corpus consisted of 21.600 words approximately, with an average essay length of 1.350 words. The procedures to collect the data were the following.

On the first week of the course, students were thoroughly informed of the purpose and data collection procedures of the study. They were invited to participate and to voluntarily sign a letter of informed consent. All 18 students in the class signed the letter, however only eight of them submitted both of their essays on time. Only 16 essays were considered for analysis. Eight essays were collected on the fifth week, and eight essays were collected on the eleventh week of the course.

One day after the second essay was collected (eleventh week), the eight participants were asked to attend individual discourse-based interview ses-

sions. A discourse-based interview is a method of composition research in which the researcher shows the writer samples of his/her own writing with highlighted text from which comments or explanations are asked (Odell, Goswami & Herrington, 1983). The purpose is to explore the writer's tacit or "taken-for-granted" knowledge of writing conventions.

During the interviews, participants were asked to comment on each of the occurrences of first person pronouns. Occurrences of first person pronouns were previously highlighted on the texts to facilitate noticing them during the interviews. Each participant's rationale for using those pronouns in their texts was elicited with questions such as: "Why did you use 'I' or 'we' here?" or "Sometimes I write as a mother, sometimes as a woman or as a teacher. What part of you was writing this 'I'?" or "Who is 'we' in this sentence?" The discourse-based interviews were held in English. They took place in a classroom and lasted 35 minutes, on average. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

2.4 Data analysis and interpretation

a. The essays

To find out how student writers used first person pronouns in their argumentative essays we employed text analysis methodology. The 16 essays were analyzed using a two-step procedure. Firstly, all occurrences of first person pronouns were highlighted on the text. However, a substantial difference was observed between the use of first person pronouns, including the singular and plural forms (I and we) and first person objective and possessive singular and plural pronouns (me, us, my and our). The latter were used far less frequently (12,7%) than the former (87,3%). For that reason, only I and we were selected for the analysis.

Secondly, each first person pronoun highlighted was coded in terms of authorial presence. Pronouns were coded as SE if the first person pronoun was used for Structuring the Essay; PPE if the pronoun was used for Presenting Personal Experience; and MSVB if the pronoun was used for Making State-

ments of Value or Beliefs. Coding was reviewed twice by each coder to ensure that each case corresponded to the description of the coding. All three researchers coded the essays independently and then compared the results. Agreement resulted in 98% of the cases. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

b. The transcripts

To investigate how student writers created identities through the use of first person pronouns, the interview transcripts were analyzed by using the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We read through the interview transcripts to understand how the students conceptualized their identity as authors when they commented on their rationale for using first person pronouns in specific cases. First, we independently coded for reference to the identities of the student writers, such as “Mexican”, “student of applied linguistics”, “language teacher” or “language learner”. Data segments from different interview transcripts were then compiled in different files so that all data related to one identity type were included in a single file. In the next step, all three researchers analyzed and discussed common patterns and points of divergence in the participants’ comments on their pronoun use. Pseudonyms were used to protect the real identity of the participants.

3. RESULTS

3.1 How do student writers use first person pronouns in their argumentative essays?

All occurrences of first person subjective pronouns (singular and plural) are summarized in Table 2. A total of 212 occurrences of first person pronouns were recorded; 107 in the first essay and 105 in the second essay. Participants used first person pronouns mostly to present personal experiences (67,3% of the pronouns used in the first essay and 62,8% of the pronouns used in the second essay). In a smaller percentage they used first person pronouns to structure the essay (12,2% of the pronouns in the first essay and

11,5% of the pronouns in the second essay) and to make statements of value or beliefs (20,5% of the pronouns used in the first essay and 25,7% of the pronouns in the second essay).

Table 2 Frequency of use of “I” and / or “we” (to structure the essay, present personal information or make statements of value of beliefs)							
Writer	Essay 1 (Globalization and cultural identity)			Essay 2 (Globalization and language learning)			Total
	SE	PPE	MSVB	SE	PPE	MSVB	
1. Al	4	0	7	6	6	4	27
2. Joe	0	1	2	0	0	3	6
3. Beth	1	1	2	0	0	2	6
4. Eli	1	9	1	3	11	5	30
5. Hanna	0	0	2	0	1	2	5
6. Ivan	3	22	1	0	11	5	42
7. Ron	4	16	4	2	20	2	48
8. Rach	0	23	3	1	17	4	48
Total	13	72	22	12	66	27	212
	12,2%	67,3%	20,5%	11,5%	62,8%	25,7%	
	100%			100%			

A more detailed analysis of the data indicates that participants' use of “I” was significantly higher than the use of “we” in all categories of the two essays. The global percentage of “I” use was 65,6% versus a 34,4% use of “we”. Apparently, not many significant changes can be observed between the uses of first person pronoun in essay 2 compared to essay 1. However, a small variation was observed in the use of “I”, since it decreased 5,9% when participants presented personal experiences. There was also a slight increase of 5,8% in the use of “we” when students made statements of value or beliefs.

The analysis of Table 2 also reveals that there are three groups of students: a) students that used many first person pronouns (Ivan, Ron and Rach); b) students who used a fair number of pronouns (Al and Eli); and c) students who used few pronouns (Joe, Hanna, and Beth). The sharpest contrast, not only in the number of first person pronouns employed but also in the purposes for which they were used, occurred between the first and the third

groups. Although Ivan, Ron, and Rach made extensive use of first person pronouns in their essays, they mainly used them to present personal experiences. In contrast, Joe, Hanna, and Beth made little use of first person pronouns; however they used them to make statements of value or belief.

These differences in purposes for which first person pronoun were used may have to do with the contrasting ways in which these students engaged with the written and spoken discourse of a new academic community. Ivan, Ron and Rach seemed to make efforts to display authority; however, they only did so at a very superficial level. They tended to present personal opinions without fully engaging with the academic debates found in the course literature. They seemed to be unable to construct solid arguments based on what had been read and discussed in class. By contrast, although Joe, Hanna, and Beth made little use of first person pronouns, they appeared to make conscious efforts to develop solid arguments that positioned them as (new) members of the academic community, in this case that of Applied Linguistics. We discuss this issue in the following section where extracts of students' essays are analyzed in more detail.

3.2 How do student writers create identities through the use of first person pronouns?

During the discourse-based interviews, participants were asked to comment on the specific cases in which they had used first person pronouns. Even though multiple identities, such as English learners and undergraduate students, were present in the participants' essays, two recurrent identities were revealed by data analysis: those who embraced the discourses of globalization and those who appeared to reject them. Two participants were selected to illustrate the contrasting features of these identities. These two participants were also chosen because they made use of first person pronouns in contrasting ways.

Rach was chosen because of her extensive use of first person pronouns to present personal experiences, and because of her tendency to embrace the discourses of globalization using them as an integral part of her authorial

self. Joe, on the other hand, was chosen because of his little use of first person pronouns, and because he seemed to oppose to some of the features of globalization discourses. The language used by these participants was not modified. The following are the two cases selected.

a. Rach

Rach used to be a nurse; however, because of several circumstances she decided to study in order to become an English teacher. She used first person pronouns 48 times in both of her essays. The following is a segment of her essay on the impact of globalization on cultural identity.

In fact, globalization has already impacted my life. I am learning to use and to investigate a different language. I am writing an essay in English and nobody at home speaks or writes in English. Globalization has made of English the lingua franca, and whether we like it or not, it will give to us new opportunities for working, new jobs. Many other professionals have no jobs; however we already have a job because we speak English. And this will change my identity, because I will have different ways of thinking because I read books and I interact with people from other countries in the Internet. That will change the way I see who I am, as consequence of globalization.

This excerpt shows that Rach made ample use of first person pronouns to present personal experiences. While she incorporates technical terminology from the course literature (e.g. lingua franca, identity, and globalization) into her essays, her arguments are limited to concrete issues in her immediate personal, academic, and potential professional context through the use of first person pronouns. For example, she discusses the idea that knowing English has enabled her to have more access to privileged knowledge, more employment opportunities, and wider social networks. In other words, Rach's use of "I" and "we" revolves around herself and her immediate social and educational environment, specifically her family and fellow students.

The extract also seems to suggest Rach's reliance on the dominant globalization discourse and its impact on the establishment of English as a lingua franca. The university in which the study took place recently implemented

a curriculum reform that includes a strong emphasis on the relationship between globalization and English language use. As part of the reform, three compulsory English language courses and one “culture and globalization” course were implemented for all undergraduate students at the beginning of their programs (See Navarro et al., 2005, and Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, 2006). The dominant discourses on higher education to which Rach’s is exposed play up the role of English language as a *lingua franca* and its potential to improve students’ employability profile.

During the interview, Rach was asked: What was your purpose in using “I” in all these sentences? Who is “I”? The following is her comment.

Instead of giving an example from another person or another place, I wanted to convince that globalization is a phenomenon that affects the life of everybody. That’s why I put myself as an example, to give a better example. I am saying how globalization is affecting my identity. Almost two years ago I was a nurse, unemployed; I wanted to work in the US, but my English... I always liked it, but I felt I was not good enough. Now I am much better, I practice English at work. But the most important thing is that I don’t feel like a nurse. I want to be a teacher and I have a job that has to do with English.

This excerpt suggests that Rach believed that she had been empowered as a consequence of her contact with English language. She described her transition from being an unemployed nurse (her previous area of study) to becoming a prospective professional (English teacher) with more job opportunities. She now seems to perceive herself as a more valuable and competent professional who is more confident about having access to better employment opportunities.

b. Joe

Joe was a former student of an undergraduate program in sociology. However, after having completed a few semesters, the BA program in Applied Linguistics was opened in the same university and he decided to enroll in it. Unlike Rach, Joe made little use of first person pronouns. He used first person pronouns 6 times in both essays. The following is an excerpt from one of his essays.

I will try to defend the idea that language education in México reflects cultural homogenization rather than cultural diversity. The import of foreign books and foreign language training courses taken by Mexican English teachers is larger than the production of textbooks and courses for teachers in our country. There is also a lack of educational materials to use in the teaching of indigenous languages. It is more common to find a book for teaching or learning English, than it is to find a book for learning Maya in a Mexican bookstore.

Although Joe used only one personal pronoun in this excerpt, he used it to make a statement of value or belief. By defending the idea that language education in Mexico reflects cultural homogenization rather than cultural diversity, he positioned himself within the debate. In addition, he used comparatives such as larger than, and more common... than to contrast the number of books and training courses available to both teachers of English and teachers of indigenous languages in his home country. By doing this, he presented a strong authorial self; he projected his individual position in relation to a controversial issue.

In addition, although Joe did not resort to the explicit use of “we” to refer to the language-teaching community, he referred to it in an indirect and subtle way. Joe’s essay conveys the idea that he conceived himself as a member of a wider community such as that of Applied Linguistics. Also, through the use of “our” he signals his membership to the Mexican culture as a whole, not only to the student body of an undergraduate program, as Rach does. Through the use of comparative forms to discuss issues of cultural homogenization, he tried to project a nationalistic identity. His discussion of the excess of imported English language teaching materials in contrast to the scarcity of materials to teach pre-Hispanic languages in Mexico portrayed the idea that he is concerned about the power gained by a language, in detriment of the culture of his home country.

The interviewer (I) asked Joe (J) his rationale for using first person pronoun in a specific case: What was your purpose of using “I” in this sentence? (Pointing) Do you remember why you used it?

J: Mmmm...yes, I wanted, I wanted to make sure that my argument was clear from the beginning. This is the first time I do it like this, I thought about

it several times. First I was not sure that that was exactly what I thought. I wrote it just meanwhile, to see if it worked. Then it sounded right, I left it there. Is it correct?

I: Yes, of course, but I would like you to read again this part and tell me a little about what you were thinking when you were writing this second essay. What part of you was speaking here? In my case I sometimes write as a mother, sometimes as a woman or as a teacher. What part of you was writing the essay?

J: I think, as a Mexican, because I'm sure there are many in other countries, in the United States and England, especially those, that do not know that we are invaded of their textbooks.

I: So you are writing to them?

J: No, not to them, but I want my readers to know how I feel, as Mexican, and how I think.

In this interview extract, Joe explained why he was trying to project his Mexican cultural identity. He described how he wanted to convey his rejection to what he thinks is cultural homogenization through the “invasion” of imported English materials in his home country to his readers. The language choices he made in his essay reflect his efforts to let his readers know his position in favor of cultural diversity, and against globalization discourses that promote cultural homogenization.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the writer identity construction of Mexican undergraduate students of Applied Linguistics. Through the use of text analysis and discourse-based interview methodologies, we focused on the use of first person pronouns and the ways in which participants conceptualized their identity as authors of their course essays.

Unlike Hyland's (2002a) study whose main finding was that Hong Kong undergraduate students underused first person pronouns, this study identified three distinct groups of students: a) those that made use of first person pronouns copiously; b) those that made a fair use of first person pronouns; and c) those that made very little use of first person pronouns. No significant changes were observed between students' first and second essays in terms of number of first-person-pronoun use. Those who used a large number of

first person pronouns in the first essay did the same in the second one. Those who made a fair use of pronouns in the first essay did so in the second essay.

In addition, those students who used first person pronouns copiously and those who used a fair number of them employed them with the purpose of narrating personal experiences, even when the writing prompts for both essays required argumentation from sources other than students' personal lives. Recounting experiences is cognitively easier than arguing for or against the ideas of other writers. We believe that the academic background of this group of students may have influenced the rhetorical choices in their essays. According to what they reported, they had never composed an essay before taking that class; not even in their first language.

We strongly believe that higher education instructors, administrators and authorities should coordinate more efforts to improve students' academic writing. University students do not receive any kind of assistance, support or guidance regarding their writing abilities. Writing difficulties are common not only in English but also in their native language. Effective academic writing depends on selecting the appropriate language resources to discuss the ideas of other authors and to present a strong authorial self. It is essential that not only writing instructors, but also instructors of all disciplines, help students deal with the interpersonal aspects of writing. The first step could be to raise students' awareness of the effects of self-mentioning and draw their attention to the fact that their language choices reflect who they are in their writing (Tang & John, 1999).

Two key issues have emerged from our analysis of Rach's and Joe's essays and the corresponding interview transcripts. The first set of issues revolves around the complexity of the relationship between the use of first person pronouns and the degree of authoritativeness conveyed in their essays. Rach used first person pronouns copiously. However, she employed them with the purpose of narrating personal experiences to the detriment of strength in her arguments. The evidence that she presented to support her claims was limited to events in her personal life. Contrastingly, Joe made little use of personal pronouns. However, he employed strong assertions and argumen-

tation to support claims that came from a variety of sources such as evidence from readings and class discussions. He used a broader range of rhetorical and interactive features other than first person pronouns to perform a strong authorial self. Through the use of comparative forms, he was able to project, on the one hand, an individual persona, and on the other hand, the qualities valued by an academic community.

This suggests that the use of first person pronouns is not essential to make statements of value and beliefs, and to display authority. Hyland (2002a), Kuo (1999), and Tang and John (1999) have argued that first person pronouns are necessary in the development of writers' strong authorial selves, because self-reference helps in communicating with authority. As our analysis of Joe's essay shows, straight assertions, strong arguments, and stylistic choices also contribute to achieving authoritativeness in writing. Instructors should provide learners with more opportunities to familiarize themselves with their discipline's knowledge and use it to construct a credible representation of themselves and their written work. This would be particularly useful for non-native writers of English who are new to the field of Applied Linguistics and in need for improving their writing abilities.

The second set of issues that emerged from this analysis has to do with the development of participants' disciplinary identity. The analysis of Joe's essays and interview transcript revealed that although he made very little use of first person pronouns in both essays, he was able to implicitly position himself as a new member of an academic community. Through a contrast between the number of imported materials to teach English against the number of locally produced materials for the teaching and learning of languages available in his home country, he seemed to criticize the negative impact of globalization on his academic community. In other words, through his analysis of the effects of globalization on the Applied Linguistics field, he was able to demonstrate disciplinary membership.

It is clear that there is variation in the degree and the ways in which writers establish an overt authorial presence by self-reference in their writing. This variation is related to a myriad of contextual factors. We can speculate that in this study the participants' backgrounds, as a nurse and as a sociologist,

may have played a role. Though, other factors such as course instruction, course readings, the writing prompt, and the teacher's feedback may have also had an effect.

Finally, most studies on writer identity have examined scientific research articles from different domains, written by both native and non-native writers of English. In this study, participants were non-native in an educational setting and the corpus consisted of course essays. Participants did not have freedom to choose their topics and did not have experience or instruction in academic writing to make a more productive use of the interactive nature of writing. Future studies could analyze the impact of these and other factors on the construction of writer identity.

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