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Writer identity construction in Mexican students of applied linguistics

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Abstract

The paper examines the connection between discursive and non-discursive features and the construction of writer identity. In particular, the paper compares and contrasts the writer identity development of two groups of undergraduate students of applied linguistics in the Mexican context, one made up of locally educated ones and the other composed of returning migrants from the USA. Through a combination of the analysis of various essays written by the participating students at different stages of their academic program and a discourse-based interview methodology, the study looks at the ways in which and the extent to which differences in international experience, professional experience and teacher education background influence the development of an essential academic identity. The results show that returnees made less use of first person pronouns and more use of sophisticated linguistic choices such as topic sentences, supporting details, and citations to strengthen their arguments and to convey their identity than their locally educated peers. However, the results also make evident the role played by non-discursive features, particularly their positioning, in the understanding of writer identity. Implications for writing instructors and further research are discussed.

Keywords: academic writing; identity; returning migrants; undergraduate students; applied linguistics.

Introduction

The literature on academic writing research highlights the importance of writer identity – that is, the author’s implicit or explicit appearance in a text (Hyland, 2002)—for the overall quality of a piece of academic writing (see, e.g. Ivanic, 1998, Hyland, 2000, Matsuda, 2001, Tang & John, 1999). Such research, however, also acknowledges the difficulty that developing an academic writer identity represents for undergraduate and graduate students.

There is even recognition that such undertaking becomes a more complex challenge for L2 writers than that faced by their L1 counterparts. However, the way in which returning migrants from an English speaking country to a Spanish speaking one construct their academic writer identity is a topic that has received little attention in the literature. Such topic becomes particularly relevant when it involves those returning migrants who choose to train as teachers of the language they acquired during the time they resided in the host country.

This paper examines the writer identity construction process of undergraduate students of applied linguistics in the Mexican context. In particular, it compares and contrasts the writer identity development of two different groups of students in terms of levels of international and professional experience and teacher training background. It uses assignments written at different stages of the undergraduate program and follow-up interviews as data. The study looks at the discursive and non-discursive features writers use to display their academic identity in their texts.

The research was carried out at a large public University located in the north-eastern region of Mexico. The immediate occasion for the study was the implementation of the BA in applied linguistics, a program that aimed to prepare English language teachers in an attempt to meet the growing demand for English language learning across Mexico. The BA in applied linguistics can be seen as an example of the spread of BAs in ELT in Mexican public universities as a result of the effect of the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in developing countries to modernize their education systems, usually through the introduction of English as a subject of study in schools, with the aim of becoming more globally competitive (Perales Escudero, Reyes Cruz, & Murrieta Loyo, 2012).

A common characteristic of these BA programs is the diversity found in the profile of the student population including levels of English proficiency, professional experience, intercultural awareness and educational background (Davies, 2011). An important proportion of the program's student population is made up of those whose schooling has taken place exclusively in Mexico, including the study of English. Some students who want to train as English teachers and who have developed a certain level of English language proficiency decide to pursue this academic degree. Yet, this type of students is likely to face challenges meeting the literacy demands of higher education institutions as they often lack previous instruction in academic writing in both Spanish and English (Hidalgo, 2010).

However, the program also attracts students who have lived and studied in the USA for a significant period of time prior to their university studies. This group of students represents nearly a quarter of the entire student population every academic term. Students returning to Mexico to resume their education have been termed transnationals or returnees in the literature, and their participation in applied linguistics or ELT undergraduate programs in other Mexican universities has been reported recently by other scholars (see for example, Crawford, Mora, Goodwin, and Lengelin, 2013; Author, 2016; and Rivas, 2013). Students returning to their home country after having spent a considerable proportion of their lives in a culturally and linguistically different country are likely to experience the difficult process of looking for the self and the management of complex identity issues in writing (Li, 2007). In addition, some students had already started their participation in professional activities, mainly language teaching, while others were just focused on their academic life. These differences raised concerns about the way in which and the extent to which these students achieve writer identity, and the factors that promote or inhibit such identity.

The paper is organized in the following way. I first start with a discussion of the notion of writer identity and how it has been conceptualized in the research literature. I then provide a brief description of the design of the research upon which this paper has been based. After that, I present and discuss the findings focusing on several factors that appear to influence or hinder writer identity formation in their text. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications that the findings have for academic writing instructors, policy makers and researchers.

Literature review

Writer identity is a topic that has been subject to considerable research over the last years. Such research often locates the concept of writer identity in relation to certain linguistic choices writers make in their texts. For example, some studies look at the role played by the use of first person pronouns in writer identity formation. Some scholars consider the use of first person pronouns in academic texts as the most obvious resource in displaying writer identity (Harwood, 2005; Hewings & Coffin, 2007; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic & Simpson 1992; Kuo, 1999; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, Sheldon, 2009; Starfield & Ravelli, 2006; Tang & John, 1999). Proponents of the inclusion of first person pronouns in academic texts appeal to the benefits of the use of such pronouns for emerging writers. Hyland (2002), for example, contends that first person pronouns use is a powerful way of achieving a strong scholarly identity and gaining acceptance for one's ideas.

Lin (2004) has warned that the sheer amount of academic texts written in the third person and passive voice that students have to read during their studies gives them a difficult time to make meaning out of those disembodied texts. Therefore, she suggests that the use of author pronouns in academic texts can facilitate the construction of emerging

writers' meaning making. Finally, Fairclough (2003) and Janks (1997) have warned about the potential unequal distribution of power between the writer and the reader through the use of third person and passive voice in writing. They point out that such practice usually conceals the student writer's agency. Therefore, they suggest that student writers be encouraged and supported to engage in meaning-making and more equitable relationships between themselves as writers and their readers through the use of first person pronouns and active voice in their texts.

Nevertheless, there is an emerging body of literature that suggests that an authoritative identity in writing can also be achieved by the use of other resources, besides the first person pronouns. For example, John (2012) proposes that citations in literature review sections are a good way through which writers can express their academic identities due to their inherent evaluative nature. Similarly, Author (2011) have argued that straight assertions, strong arguments and stylistic choices such as the use of comparative forms can also help academic writers demonstrate authoritativeness. These studies highlight the idea that even though such language features may not make the writer appear as overly present in texts as first person pronouns, they are indeed signals of the writers' visible presence in the text and help enhance the quality of academic argumentation.

Yet, the study of writer identity not only has been concerned with the analysis of textual features. It has also been studied taking into account social aspects. One concept that has been used in the exploration of identity in written discourse is that of voice. According to Matsuda (2015), voice is a concept that operationalizes writer identity in written discourse. He suggests that voice is an important consideration in written discourse because the way in which writers present themselves has an effect on the reader. However, he warns that developing an effective voice not only requires an ample repertoire of

linguistic choices, but also an awareness of their possible impact. It may also require “the development of field knowledge and audience awareness as well as an awareness of how self is situated in complex relation of power (Matsuda, 2015: 154). Pursuing a similar line of argument, Zhao and Llosa (2008) highlight the importance of considering features of voice in written discourse. They claim that the quality of a piece of writing can be enhanced by voice issues when applied appropriately and in the right context.

The notion of voice, however, has also been problematized in the second language writing literature. Helms-Park and Stepleton (2003: 256) put forward the idea that issues of voice “should be treated as a relatively minor concern” in L2 writing instruction. They propose that writing instruction should focus on encouraging students to present valid and well-supported arguments, rather than on helping them develop a voice in their pieces of writing. In a similar vein, it has been claimed that the notion of voice as practiced in writing textbooks and teaching practices only represents the individualistic ideology of West societies (Bowden, 1999; Harris, 1997; Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996). Likewise, Hyland (2002) contends that voice in academic writing is a more problematic activity for non-native speakers because they are usually expected to adopt the dominant literacy practices of the target academic culture which are normally different from those practiced in their home cultures. Similarly, Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) point out that non-native English speaking students from collectivist cultures are more likely to struggle to adopt an individualist writer identity as required in dominant academic cultures.

All these works show that discursive and non-discursive issues play a role in writer identity formation. The aim of this study is to add to this body of literature by looking at the way in which undergraduate students of applied linguistics in a Mexican context construct

their writer identity. In particular, I compare two groups of students, one composed of Mexican born and locally educated ones, and the other one made up of returnees from the United States. In doing so, I draw on the work of Matsuda & Tardy (2007), in which writer identity is understood as an “amalgamative effect” resulting from the use of discursive and non-discursive features in the text. In this definition, identity is not only something that resides in the text; it also involves an understanding of nonlinguistic aspects, including ways in which writers enact interpersonal and ideational positioning in their writing through language.

Methodology

Selection of participants

The participants in the study were four undergraduate students of applied linguistics, a program offered by a large public university in Mexico. All participants were members of the first two cohorts of such program. The students were studying in the sixth and eighth semesters of their program at the time of the study. The first criterion used for inclusion was that students were regular in their academic status. The idea was to include students who had achieved straight passing grades during their studies. This meant that those students that had failing or incomplete marks would not be included. Of the 33 formally registered students in those two cohorts, 17 met this requirement. However, only four of those students handed in the four papers that were required to participate in the study. The rest of the students submitted either only some or none of the requested written assignments. Therefore, they were not considered for the study.

Although gender considerations or level of success as students were not established as criteria for selection, the resulting four participants shared two characteristics: They all were females in their early twenties and had achieved at least a 9.5 GPA. One of the participating students was enrolled in the sixth semester at the time of the study, the other three were in the eighth (last) semester. However, they had contrasting differences in terms of international and teaching experience and teacher training background. Two of the respondents had lived and studied in the United States for a significant period of time. Although, they were born in Mexico, they were taken to the United States at an early age, and returned to Mexico before starting their university studies. This type of students has been termed returnees in the literature (See Rivas, 2013). They had also started their English teaching career and had participated (or were in the middle of their participation) in teacher training courses apart from their BA program. The other two participants were born and educated exclusively in Mexico, had not yet participated in professional activities as English teachers and had obtained a teacher knowledge certificate for beginning teachers. Therefore, I decided to conduct a comparative analysis to find out how their writer identity is shaped by such differences. Table 1 provides a more detailed academic profile of each of the participants.

[Table 1 near here]

Table 1. Participants' academic profile

Data Collection

I made use of two different sources of data. One was the analysis of four academic papers that participants had submitted for assessment during the BA program. I decided to include those papers following three basic criteria. One was that they were representative of the

four original strands of the BA program. They were introduction to university academic life, professional development, disciplinary formation and research training. Therefore, I selected one paper drawn from each of these components. The second criterion was that they included papers written at different stages of the program development (different academic terms). And finally, I decided to include papers that reflected the growing level of academic complexity or demand over the course of the program, which had been established as part of its overall design. I felt that the application of these criteria would enable me to be in a better position to assess the students' academic writing progress over time.

I collected four different assignments from each participant, a total of 16 pieces of work. All the assignments were argumentative, a genre of writing in which the writer presents the arguments on an issue in order to persuade the reader to agree with a particular point of view (Chandrasegaran 2008). I chose sample papers from both the early and the late stages of the program development, except for papers from the first or eighth semesters as the former includes only courses as part of the common core curriculum for all undergraduate students and the latter focuses on courses leading to graduation.

The first paper was submitted in the second semester as part of the requirements of the intercultural communication course. It required students to write a 600 word essay discussing how the spread of the English language influences their cultural identity. The second assignment was given in the context of the academic writing course, which is normally offered in the third semester. It required students to discuss about an aspect of English language curriculum such as English language teaching approaches or textbook use.

The third paper was part of the second language acquisition course, which took place in the sixth semester and required students to select a second language acquisition theory and argue in favour or against it. The students were also required to support their claims with relevant literature covered in the face to face class sessions. Finally, the last paper was assigned in the introduction to research methods in applied linguistics course, which is offered in the seventh semester. Specifically, it required students to select a research approach (quantitative, qualitative or critical) and write a paper in which they provide a discussion either in favour or against it, focusing on theoretical and methodological assumptions and relating them to the course literature. Table 2 provides a summary of the papers used for analysis.

[Table 2 near here]

Table 2. Sources of data

The second source of data was a discourse-based interview with each of the participants. A discourse based interview is a method of composition research in which the researcher shows the writer samples of his/her writing with highlighted text to ask for comments or explanations (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington, 1983). The purpose is to explore the writer's tacit or "taken-for-granted" knowledge of writing conventions. On the day the participants submitted their assignments for analysis, they were asked to attend individual interview sessions, which were conducted one week later to allow for text analysis to take place. During the interview, the participants were presented with extracts in which aspects of writer identity were present. Participants were then asked about their reasons behind discourse choices used in their papers, as well as their perceptions regarding the role of such choices in academic writing. The discourse-based interviews were

conducted in English. They took place in a classroom and lasted, on average, 35 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Before the data-collection phase started, the participants were provided with a detailed description of the purpose, the methods and the potential implications of the study in an informed consent form. They were assured that the analysis of their essays and the follow-up interview data would only be used for research purposes. They were also debriefed with respect to their right to participant anonymity. In other words, I made sure to obtain autonomous authorization from the persons participating in the research (Wellington, 2000).

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, I first read through the 16 essays to get a general feel of the texts. I then identified instances in which their writer identity was reflected. A set of codes was used to sort the extracts into themes relating to writer identity. After that, relevant extracts were further analysed, using a process of open coding to construct a more nuanced understanding of the impact of discursive and non-discursive features on writer identity formation.

The interview transcripts were analysed by means of the constant comparative approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). First, I read the transcripts thoroughly, focusing on the reasons the participating students provided for using certain language choices in their essays. Then, I coded for reference to the different factors influencing their writer identity. Extracts from data that reflected such different factors were compiled in

different Word documents so that all data related to each category or factor were included in separate computer files. Finally, I set out to identify commonalities and divergences in students' accounts.

It is important to mention that my role as insider within the research context was invaluable to my research endeavour in general and to my data analysis in particular. The literature states that insider researchers are also the research instrument as they can translate and interpret data generated from the respondents into meaningful information (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). I was able to identify contextual aspects and participants' individual differences that facilitated the data analysis process due to my position as professor and student supervisor in the BA program context.

Results

The data analysis revealed a similarity of discourses articulated by all the participants, despite their differences in English language proficiency level, degree of intercultural awareness, and professional experience. These students shared a discourse that seemed to reflect their identity as (future) English language teachers. In particular, such identity was projected through the concerns they expressed about the contribution they think they can make to the improvement of different aspects of the English language teaching field in quite similar ways. However, as I show in more detail below, there were differences between the two groups of students regarding the linguistic choices they made and the level of argumentation displayed in their essays, which in turn influenced the achievement, or the lack of, writer identity. Examples from two groups of students' texts and extracts from their interviews are used to illustrate these differences.

Sandra and Monica are two students with an upper intermediate level of English proficiency. Their education, including their English language education, has taken place exclusively in Mexico, with Monica engaged in a short spell of English language study in the United States. The two of them hold internationally recognized English language proficiency certifications, FCE and TOEFL IBT respectively, equivalent to a B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They also hold a Teaching Knowledge test, which is a standardized test used to assess candidates' knowledge of English language teaching. The analysis of their texts clearly conveys a strong sense of interest in looking for ways to facilitate the English language learning in their contexts. Nevertheless, this generally positive aspect was tempered by what might be seen as a limited approach to presenting their arguments. This approach was exhibited through the descriptive nature of their accounts and the presence of anecdotal evidence to support their ideas in these two participants' texts, which in turn influenced their authoritative identity. The following excerpt taken from Sandra's essay written for the second language acquisition course shows this point:

There are some theories of how a language may be taught. However, I was a little bit more interested in the 'eclectic method' because it is a concept that I have experienced in some classes I have taken; most of the teachers tend to acquire a method that fits with their group of students and finally if there is something that varies they dare to introduce another technique even if it does not concern the method that is being used. I consider this eclectic way of managing a course like another option, and the reason for use [sic] it is that among the group we could face significant variations and teachers must be aware of this in order to see what they can do and apply to fulfil the purposes of the group in general (Sandra).

Another extract taken from Monica's intercultural communication essay also reveals the presence of anecdotal evidence to support her claims:

I think cultural aspects play an important role in English language learning. I remember one day when our teacher invited speakers from different cultures to class. These speakers were from Germany, Belgium, India, France and Japan. Even though Mexico is not a multicultural country, it happened that for some reason those people were around. The most interesting part for me was that we [the students] had the opportunity to interact with people from different countries for the first time in our lives. Most of us had never seen people from different countries in the same place at once, and by that time no one in the class had been in a different country, but the south border of the USA, which is three hours away from here [this city in México] and many people there speak Spanish. I learned that every culture has a different way to perceive the world (Monica).

Similarly, in a paper Monica wrote for the academic writing course, she argued that errors in second language writing should be corrected promptly. The paper reflects her recurrence to the inclusion of strong and unsupported claims. The following excerpt taken from the introduction section of the paper shows this point:

It is common to see that Mexican students tend to commit errors during writing. These errors might happen because of the interference of the mother tongue, students think in Spanish and they do not switch to English, they fossilize errors and they do not get rid of them easily. Furthermore with these kind of problems learners have difficulties to form coherent ideas and put them into a text. In addition I have found learners that do not show these kind of difficulties but they have lack of abilities to organize their ideas into a text in an adequate form, and this is difficult for them when they want to transmit the ideas to the readers. The problem is that some teachers do not correct the errors right away. Later in this paper, I will explain why I think these errors need to be corrected soon (Monica).

These excerpts are interesting on a number of levels. For example, they strongly suggest that many student-teachers continue to rely on their own previous experiences as English learners to construct their arguments in writing. While their arguments about the importance of adopting an 'eclectic method' based on their students' needs, the significance of promoting intercultural understanding among students and the concern to come up with ways of helping their students overcome their writing difficulties are valid and even laudable, the ways in which they present their claims are open to question. The analysis of these excerpts suggests that student teachers continue to make use of personal anecdotes from their immediate context as evidence to support their ideas, despite the prevalence in educational discourse of the value of using professional literature to enhance the quality of academic essays.

During the discourse-based interview, these two participants were asked to provide a commentary on specific cases in which they had used first person pronouns. The following is the commentary provided by Sandra in relation to her reasons for choosing to argue in favor of the use of an eclectic approach to English language teaching in the essay she wrote for the second language acquisition course:

I was thinking of all the teachers I had had before. I remembered that most of my teachers used techniques and strategies from different teaching methods, but mmm I guess they just used them without actually knowing why or how. I mean I guess they didn't use them consistently. And now that I see the text again, I still feel that teachers need to use a method that best suits the needs or interests of their students, even if that means using features from different methods or approaches. I also feel that I would like to do that in the future when I have my own groups of students (Sandra).

Similarly, Monica provided further details as to why the activity intended to promote intercultural awareness when she was still a learner of English had had an impact on her life:

I chose that activity because it was very meaningful for me and I think for my classmates too. And I say that the activity was meaningful not only because I learned a lot about the importance of understanding other cultures, but because I felt that I wanted to project the idea that I want to be able to give my own students similar opportunities. So I used the pronoun I because it's me who wants to do that when I become a teacher (Monica).

When asked about the position she adopted with respect to errors and mistakes in L2 writing in the essay she wrote for the academic writing course, Monica suggested that the writing difficulties she had experienced as an English as a foreign language learner, and continues to experience to the present time as revealed in the excerpt from her essay, can be explained by the fact that her teachers themselves were unable to provide the language support she needed at that time. The following quotation shows this point:

Unfortunately, the majority of the English teachers [in her learning context] do not have the preparation or the skills that are required to teach writing properly. I still remember that the strategies they only used in class were dictation, spelling and fixed sentences (Monica).

The above quotations reflect the noble aspirations these two students have with respect to their role as future teachers. It is clear that they have started to identify difficulties confronting students in their context and ways to address such difficulties once they become classroom teachers. However, the excerpts also make evident that students still rely on their own previous experiences as English as a foreign language learners as the

main sources to frame both their written assignments and their aspirations for their professional lives.

Daniela and Alejandra are two students with an advanced level of English proficiency. They both have had the opportunity to study English as a second language in the United States, with Alejandra being able to complete her pre-school and elementary education there and Daniela completing both elementary and middle school. The two of them hold internationally recognized English language proficiency certifications, FCE and TOEFL IBT respectively, equivalent to a B2 level in the CEFR. They also have professional experience as English teachers, with Daniela having two years and Alejandra six at the time of the study. In addition of their preparation in the BA program, the two of them had engaged in a British teacher training course called In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching, known for its high academic standards. Alejandra had already obtained it and Daniela was in the midst of her participation in the course at the time of the data collection for the study.

As with Sandra and Monica, Daniela and Alejandra also demonstrated their eagerness to become more actively engaged in developing ways to improve the English language teaching provision in their professional contexts. For example, Alejandra wrote about the role played by the use of a textbook in a language institute:

Since the use of a textbook represents an essential part in the development of a course and the different agents involved in the process of learning, its selection must be carefully done. Nowadays, language education practices have gone through a shift in the focus from teacher to learner, referred to as learner-centered approach. For this reason, the importance of finding a book that reflects the needs of the learners is essential. This situation demands special attention to the kind of content that it is going

to be presented to learners and how it addresses their objectives and aspirations (Awasthi, 2006; Cunningsworth, 1995).

As this paper has tried to explain, textbook evaluation is an important practice for the task of guarantying the development and good results of any language course. In addition, this practice is also relevant for teachers because it helps them to get the better outcomes of their language program and the resources and materials at their disposal. For this reason, the information and criteria for textbook evaluation presented previously is applied on this paper to find details on the use of a specific textbook in a language institution in the state of Tamaulipas in Mexico. The title of the book is “brainstorm” which is used at the institution for the levels of children (Alejandra).

Similarly, Daniela expressed her desire to identify ways in which young adults’ motivation to learn English can be raised:

I am interested in exploring young adults’ English language learning motivation. To that end, I would choose a qualitative research approach. According to Punch (2005), in a qualitative study, the researcher is interested in people’s personal views and sensitive matters. I would adopt this approach because I want to understand why some students are motivated and others are not, and this affects their learning. Some of these students have problems in acquiring the language because they have never been in a place where they use English in real situations so it is a little more difficult to learn it. To do so, I would observe and interview some students from the Center for Languages and Applied Linguistics (CELLAP) about their experiences learning English as a foreign language; these students are from 18 to 23 years [sic]. Students are in university level where they need to learn a foreign language to communicate or just for academic purposes (Daniela).

Daniela’s concern to contribute to the improvement of the quality of English language education was also reflected in the following excerpt taken from Daniela’s introductory paragraph of her academic writing assignment:

We write e-mails, letters, or simply convey messages in WhatsApp in our daily lives. That is the reason why we should master this ability. This is a big matter because one

of the most important skills that an EFL student should have is writing (Hyland, K. 2003). He also mentions that the ability to teach writing is central to the expertise of a well-trained language teacher. However, recent studies demonstrate that traditional writing models continue to be used in many contexts. In my years of experience I can state that the English program and teachers of the public schools of Tamaulipas use a traditional approach to teaching writing. According to (Ferris & Hedgcock, J.S., 1998) the traditional writing model reflected a perspective in which students' written products were viewed as static representations of their knowledge and learning. In this essay, I will propose three strategies that will help the students enhance their writing abilities (Daniela).

In addition to the display of these participants' position as members of the English language teaching community through their eagerness to help improve the English language teaching provision in their contexts, these quotes also reflect their ability to use different linguistic resources to project their authoritative identity as academic writers. In the case of Alejandra, although no use of first person pronouns is included in the two paragraphs extracted from her essay, she manages to express her academic identity by incorporating appropriate topic sentences, supporting details, citation, and above all, academic language. A strong academic discourse lay in the use of phrases as "language education practices", "shift in the focus of", "learner-centered approach", and "textbook evaluation" to present her arguments.

Daniela also expressed a strong writer identity through her essays. Nevertheless, she did so in quite different ways from those of Alejandra. In the case of her research methodology paper, the analysis suggests that she gave prominence to the use of active voice in her text. This was evidenced not only by her recourse to use first person pronouns to write her assignment, but also by the way in which she addresses citation issues. She cites a research methodology author in such a way that the researcher's voice can be heard,

suggesting that she acknowledges the active role that the researcher plays in qualitative methodologies. In other words, her decision to make the researcher's presence more visible in her text appears to be informed by the carefully reasoned adoption of a qualitative research approach.

Likewise, Daniela's academic orientation was also exhibited in the excerpt taken from her academic writing assignment's introduction. In addition to presenting her ideas in a clear and logical manner as shown by the way in which she sets the context, highlights the importance of the topic and addresses a gap in the literature, the excerpt also reveals the confidence she has developed to employ ample academic language in her texts. This included ideas such as "the ability to teach writing is central to the expertise of a well-trained language teacher", "recent studies demonstrate that traditional writing models continue to be used in many contexts", traditional writing models reflected a perspective in which students' written products were viewed as static representations of their knowledge and learning" and "In this essay, I will propose three strategies that will help the students enhance their writing abilities. These statements also reflect intellectual values such as concern for evidence and respect for others' ideas. While the argument that "the English program and teachers of the public schools of Tamaulipas use a traditional approach to teaching writing" she included there may be open to question, it may also be indicative of her interest in making a contribution in this respect and the lack of available research reports in her context.

Similarly, these latter students' capacity to make informed decisions about the linguistic choices that help them demonstrate authoritativeness in writing was also evident in the transcripts of the interviews with them. For example, during the interview about why she employed the first person pronouns in this segment of her paper, Daniela explained that

she had made a conscious effort ‘*to adhere to the principles and guidelines for writing-up reports of studies that are qualitative in nature*’ Similarly, Alejandra had a clear idea of what a well-argued essay looks like in writing. Upon being questioned about her rationale for the scarce use she had made of first person pronouns in her research report, she described her approach as an ‘*unconscious*’ process. The following extract shows this point as well as the elements she felt were important when tackling academic written tasks:

Well I never thought about using or leaving out those pronouns in my paper. I guess I did it unconsciously. I just focused on the aspects that I think are important. What I did first was to read about the topic as much as I could because I knew that I needed to look for the necessary information to back-up my ideas. I also wanted my paper to sound as academic as possible; that’s why I tried to choose my words carefully. I also revised the paper a couple of times.

The above quotes are illustrative of the variety and scope of the linguistic resources that students can use to enhance their writer identity. In particular, they show that writing academic essays with authority can be learned either deductively or inductively. On the one hand, Daniela’s case shows that she is aware of the possibility to include first person pronouns to make the researcher’s presence more visible when discussing qualitative research issues, suggesting that she has been trained as to when, where and how to use those pronouns (Tang and John, 1999). On the other hand, Alejandra’s case shows that she relied heavily on reading material that helped her develop an academic identity through the use of linguistic features other than first person pronouns (John, 2012).

Conclusions

The above analysis raises some interesting issues about the way in which undergraduate students of applied linguistics construct their writer identity, and the role played by discursive and non-discursive features in all this process. The findings suggest that writer identity is highly dependent upon the personal qualities that students bring into the writing process. Such qualities include international and professional experience and teacher training background. Although highly unsurprising, the study has generated sufficient evidence of the variety and scope of linguistic features that contribute to the construction of a viable academic writer identity as well as the processes involved in the development of such identity.

In this case, those students who had lived and studied in the United States for some time before their undergraduate program, had some professional experience and had engaged in more academically demanding teacher training opportunities (ICELT) made less use of first person pronouns and more use of sophisticated linguistic choices that in turn contribute to successful academic arguments than their peers who had little or no international or professional experience and had taken part in less advanced teacher training programs (TKT). They employed academic resources such as topic sentences, supporting details, and citations to strengthen their arguments and to convey their identity. While they did incorporate first person pronouns into their research-based assignment, they did it in an informed way when they adopted the role of a qualitative researcher, which in turn enhanced their authorial capacity. In other words, different linguistic resources, including first person pronouns, appear to contribute to a large extent to the construction of a strong writer authorial self and argument. This adds to the literature contending that there are other

language options, besides first person pronouns, that can also be used by writers in their efforts to construct academic arguments and to display an essential authoritative identity (John, 2012; Author, 2011).

In addition to helping identify linguistic features used to display authoritativeness in writing, our data also help reveal the processes involved in achieving such authoritativeness. Our data suggest that writing with authority can be learned through the use of different approaches. In particular, the participants made use of both deductive and inductive approaches to learning writing. For example, it was clear that Daniela made a conscious effort to make her role as a qualitative researcher more visible by intentionally incorporating first person pronouns in her research report. In the case of Alejandra, she highlighted how reading academic material extensively had helped her with her writing endeavour. The implication for academic writing instructors is to provide students with opportunities to become aware of the variety of the linguistic features as well as the approaches to learning writing available to them so as to construct both solid academic arguments and an effective writer identity.

Yet, the findings of the study give further support to Matsuda's (2015) contention that identity in written discourse requires not only an examination of textual features, but also an understanding of non-discursive features, including the position of the writer. The data suggests that different aspects related to the sense of who the students are or who they want to become remained implicit, rather than explicit, in the students' texts. For example, both groups of students projected a similar orientation to position themselves within their professional community of practice by their constant emphasis on a concern to help improve a variety of aspects of their professional contexts, albeit by different means. Indeed, such concern was also made evident in the interviews with them. While this

concern is difficult to be questioned by members of the ELT community, it was not clear what purpose they had in mind to present themselves as future caring practitioners. As a speculation, I suggest that both groups of students had the intention to display a genuine interest in improving their professional field, rather than strategically showing their awareness of the possible effect of their choices on their audience, what Matsuda (2015) refers to as agentic voice. Whether becoming more aware of the possible effects of their own choices is a more educationally desirable aim than the development of intellectual honesty in writing is an important question for further research.

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Name (pseudonym)	Language certifications	Teaching certifications	International student experience	Teaching experience
Sandra	First Certificate in English (FCE)	Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)	No	No
Mónica	TOEFL IBT	TKT	One month (summer)	No
Daniela	FCE	TKT, currently enrolled in the In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT)	Eight years during elementary and middle school	Yes (two years at the time of the study)
Alejandra	TOEFL-IBT	ICELT	Six years during her elementary studies	Yes (five years at the time of the study)

Table 1. Participants' academic profile

Semester	Course title	Length
2nd	Intercultural Communication	600 words
3 rd	Academic Writing	1500 words
6th	Second Language Acquisition	2500 words
7th	Introduction to Research in Applied Linguistics	2500 words

Table 2. Sources of data

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Writer identity construction in Mexican students of applied linguistics

This article is concerned with the way in which two groups of undergraduate students of applied linguistics, one made up of Mexican born and educated ones and the other composed of those who were born in Mexico, but had lived and studied in the USA for some time, create a sense of who they are as academic writers. This is significant because the profile of the student population of many undergraduate programs that prepare English teachers in Mexico has become highly diverse recently. Based on the analysis of academic essays and interviews with the participants, the article illustrates how these differences impact the achievement of, or the lack of, a viable sense of who they are and who they want to be as writers and the quality of their arguments in academic texts. Understanding the effects that these student differences can help design appropriate academic writing programs and policies.

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