



Reinventing Identities in Second Language Writing

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INTRODUCTION

[Second language] writers are remarkably diverse, and thus no one label can accurately capture their heterogeneity. Yet that does not stop teachers and researchers from labeling. It may be that we use labels such as ESL—even if they do not match students' profiles—to provide us with a shared shorthand by which we can talk about learners. But even if our reasons are well intentioned, we need to consider that, in the process of labeling students, we put ourselves in the powerful position of rhetorically constructing their identities, a potentially hazardous enterprise. (SPACK, 1997, p. 765)

In the twenty-first century, the rhetorical construction of second language writers continues to be complicated. Second language writers have historically been identified by labels and categories, including ESL, LEP, EFL, ELL, ESOL, bilingual, nonnative English speaker (NNES), L2, and Generation 1.5. The terms move in and out of favor based on a number of factors from political correctness to educational policy. But all of these terms mask the complexity of second language writers' identities. Given the widely different contexts in which people encounter English both in the United States and abroad, and given English's wide circulation as an evolving lingua franca, the identities of "second language learners" are shaped by factors well outside traditional U.S. classrooms. American popular culture; print, television, and online media; contact with other languages at home and in social settings; residency in more than one country; affiliations with different economic classes; and even ongoing racism mean that students' identities are more than a function of their language proficiency. Yet the labels that instructors and administrators

apply—and are compelled to apply—to these students simplify the rich multiplicity of identities that L2 writers inhabit, invent, and revise as they compose.

In 2006, three of us worked with Paul Kei Matsuda to co-edit *Second Language Writing in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*. In that volume, we noted the expansive demographic shifts and the important developments that had taken place in second language writing research and teaching. If the goal of that volume was to provide writing teachers with a foundation in second language writing, our goal with this volume is to expand on that conversation by focusing on identity, an extensively theorized but still elusive concept—especially in settings where cultural and linguistic experiences mix. This collection is composed of both researched chapters and first-person essays that seek to make this elusive concept more tangible, while drawing on a number of theoretical frames and situational contexts.

The researched chapters investigate how second language writers enact, construct, and invent themselves through writing, sometimes challenging the notion that second language writing identity is passively constructed by the contexts in which these writers write, and other times investigating and questioning the power structures. The first-person essays reflect on writers' ongoing identity formation through acts of writing. The spectrum of second language experiences captured in the collection displays the richness and multiplicity of identity invention and reinvention; subjugation, negotiation, and assertion; flexibility and rhetoricity. The chapters are divided into three sections: Section I, Formations and Transitions in Second Language (L2) Identity looks at second language writers' identity formations through adolescence, through college and graduate years, in their academic disciplines, and into new workplaces. Section II, L2 Identity as Resource and Strategy, includes chapters that explore identity as a resource from multiple angles and across multiple sites, including secondary schools, college classrooms, and writing centers. Section III, Globalism and Technology: L2 Identity in the Twenty-First Century, addresses Web 2.0 technology, multiliteracies, World Englishes, and the global economy.

Any collection that takes up the question of identity enters a complicated conversation. In this volume, we begin with the idea

that identity, as well as writing, is always socially situated. Second language writing, as a field, draws from both composition studies and studies of second language acquisition; thus, it follows that the chapters in this collection bring together theories emerging from each of these disciplines as well as cognate fields, especially in the social sciences. By providing separate overviews of how the fields have discussed identity, we acknowledge the separate disciplinary histories of composition and second language writing. However, we are hopeful that scholars from each field can find valuable points of convergence in reading and discussing this volume.

Theorizing Identity in Composition

The history of identity theory in composition is elusive because identity-related work has been alternately discussed in concepts of “self” and “representation,” among many other concepts. So we begin our discussion of identity in composition by tracing some of the historical events and discussions that have led to contemporary conceptions of identity in this field. Since its institution in colleges and universities in the late nineteenth century, composition has been concerned with how to write students’ identities into academic settings. Frequently, this project has attempted to reconcile the identities students bring with them with the identities their instructors expect them to occupy—or at least perform—as they develop into academic and professional writers. The transition into college has always seemed a rite of passage for students in the United States, and composition courses—positioned as first-year requirements across the curriculum—have served as a kind of initiation rite. This pressure on composition curricula has meant that conversations about identity in the field have run a range of concerns and have mingled with other issues. In the wake of early-twentieth-century immigration, for example, composition served the end of producing good U.S. citizens who were fluent in English at all levels of schooling (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008). As part of a national effort to compete with the Soviet Union after World War II, writing teaching interacted with both communication teaching and the teaching of English as a second language to

bolster the education of American scientists and engineers and to build a hedge against Russian linguistic and cultural encroachment in Latin America (Crowley, 1998; Matsuda, 1999, 2003).

As enrollment in U.S. college classrooms diversified even more through the 1960s and 1970s, composition scholars and teachers responded by reconsidering their approaches to students' already formed and emerging identities. Some of the best known literature of this period explicitly aimed to help students use writing in their development of an authentic sense of self, as opposed to long-standing directives to try on academic language (Elbow, 1973; Macrorie, 1970; Murray, 1968). In response to these popular "inner-directed" approaches to writing (Bizzell, 1982), theorists of discourse communities sought to teach students to locate themselves in and among the social contexts mediating their language use and identity development. In this view, students' identities are not expressed through writing and other acts of composition but are actually *formed* through them: language is a means through which students are consistently "controlling their becoming" (Berthoff, 1984). In more recent scholarship, Brooke (1988), Ivanič (1998), and Newkirk (1997) have aimed to move beyond the binaries of expressivism and social constructivism by investigating the complex performances of writer identity under a variety of pressures, following the social theories of Goffman (1969).

Concurrent with debates about expressivism and the discursivity of identity, a growing number of scholar-teachers were applying insights from sociolinguistics in an attempt to determine whether students' preclassroom language practices were commensurable with the demands of academic writing. Supported by research that pointed to the rule-governed and productive nature of students' home languages and varieties (Fishman, 1972; Hymes, 1972; Labov, 1972), the authors of the CCCC resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language" argued for field-wide recognition of students' identities as users of multiple languages and dialects. Both Canagarajah (1999) and Gilyard (1996) have surveyed the evolution of composition during this period and have noted its shift from considering linguistically diverse students to be deficient communicators to considering them fully capable of bridging differences between home and academic varieties.

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On this point, discursive theories of identity and the study of language diversity appear to have much in common: if identities are a function of the interconnectedness and fluidity of discourse communities, then teaching linguistically diverse students how to shift into the discourses of academic and professional U.S.-based English seems like a sensible and feasible pedagogy.

Recent commentators remind us, however, that discourse is not the only—nor even the most salient—consideration in identity formations. While the relationship between identity and language is well accepted in the field, the idea that language is intimately connected with a range of other identity factors is also compelling. In his study of first-year law students, Gee (2008) observed that students from middle and upper socioeconomic classes have an easier time acclimating to law schools because the pedagogy followed up on what those students had been exposed to in their earlier literacy education. Gee's work highlighted the reality that the educational experiences of students are dependent on the socioeconomic and ethnic constitution of the neighborhoods in which they live. Funding for teachers, books, teaching resources, professional development, technology, and school spaces is often made more difficult when tied to limited tax bases and other unevenly distributed means of financial support. These material differences can solidify and affect students throughout primary and secondary education and into college.

Some compositionists interested in ameliorating such structural differences have become invested in critical approaches to teaching, language policy, and the histories that inform both. These scholars attempt to articulate possibilities for identity between the poles of essentialism and discursivity. Gilyard (2000) consistently emphasizes the rhetorical basis of racism and other similar structural problems but believes that the “whole realities” attached to racial differences “operate powerfully in the world and have to be productively engaged” (p. 270; also see LeCourt, 2004). In the Freirean tradition of critical pedagogy, hooks (1994) argues that underrepresented students must be brought to voice in order to resist the structural inequalities that put them at a disadvantage.

Materialist considerations also factor into recent composition scholarship that is more directly relevant to second language

writers. Horner and Trimbur (2002) and Trimbur (2008) argue that composition teaching and national language policies have historically enshrined English as the only language medium for writing and have elevated the native English speaker as the clear standard—even at purportedly liberatory moments such as the 1966 Dartmouth conference. Lu (1994, 2004) explores wider cultural and economic contexts for her nonnative English-speaking students' linguistic choices. And Canagarajah (2002) illustrates the uneven distribution of scholarly materials that can hinder the work of international scholars. Clearly, language, identity positions, and material conditions interact to constrain and—potentially—enable second language writers.

Theorizing Identity in Second Language Writing

In the fields that focus on second language learning, research on linguistic identity has traditionally held a critical perspective, focusing on concerns of power and access. Influenced by the works of Halliday (1973), Bourdieu (1977), Anderson (1991), Weedon (1987), and Fairclough (1989), among others, contemporary scholarship in these fields begins with the premise that second language users are in profoundly unique identity situations (also see Block, 2006, 2007). We have deliberately chosen to address the following second language identity texts in some detail, because they may be less familiar to composition scholars, and they are referenced frequently in this collection.

Norton, a specialist in applied linguistics and literacy, has long led the call for a theory of identity for second language learners, noting that language is both “constitutive of and constituted by a language learner’s identity” (2000, p. 5). Norton’s study (2000) on immigrant women in Canada exemplified the ways in which language can serve as a gatekeeper, either providing or denying second language learners access to networks for further learning. She argues that any research on the identity positions of second language users must acknowledge uneven power dynamics, social structures, and social interactions that exist between language learners and target language speakers.

Questions of access, as well as the sociopolitical dimensions of bilingualism, are also taken up in the work of Kanno (2003). Kanno encourages a theory of second language identity that stresses “identity as *movement*” (p. 10; emphasis added). Drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of communities of practice, Kanno finds that as students move into the target language community, they are often marginalized, and thus struggle to embrace their multilingual identities (p. 13). With increased membership in the target language community as well as more maturity, they come to embrace their bilingual “hybrid” identities with confidence (p. 134).

In the United States, debates over “English Only” movements, bilingual education, and immigration all complicate the ways in which U.S.-resident second language users establish their linguistic and cultural identities (for example, see Farr, 2006). As writers, their experiences are tinged with difficult questions about the value of bilingualism, marginalization, and representation that complicate identity choices. Chiang and Schmida (1999) documented the experiences of bilingual, U.S.-born college students, finding that the label “linguistic minority” often hindered students in their writing classrooms, as they often internalized teachers’ assumptions of their language histories and fluencies, questioning their ownership of English (p. 93).

Harklau (2000) and Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) noted similar concerns with the institutional representations of ESOL students as they transitioned from high school to college ESL and writing classrooms. Harklau found that while L2 students were often praised by their high school teachers, the same students were seen as challenging in their college ESL classrooms. Often, as noted by Ortmeier-Hooper (2008), these shifts in representation were fueled by students’ rejection of being identified as ESL students and their discomfort with being deemed “outsiders” to North American culture and the English language. As Harklau (2000) argues, when “sociocultural categories of culture and identity” are established, those categories are “intrinsically unstable,” “heterogeneous,” and “problematic” (p. 37). But despite that reality, the identities of second language writers are often characterized as “stable, homogenous, and taken-for-granted” in many educational settings (Harklau, 2000, p. 37). It is this dubious concept

of a “stable” and “homogenous” L2 identity that Shondel Nero (2006) interrogates in her body of research. Drawing on LePage and Tabouret-Keller’s (1985) “acts of identity” framework, Nero considers how second language users adapt their linguistic use and behavior to identify with a desirable group. Like Harklau, Nero finds that the “dynamism” of identity is often obscured by educational institutions’ intent “to ascribe fixed ethno-linguistic identities to students” (p. 195).

As we noted in the opening of this introduction, the notion that second language writers have “fixed identities” has become increasingly problematic. In the past decade, scholars in second language writing have pointed to the increasingly complex nature of the L2 student/user community. Canagarajah (2002) highlights the range of English users that exists in today’s global economy, from English users in postcolonial nations to those individuals using English for international business, politics, and education. As Canagarajah writes,

It is becoming more and more difficult to “essentialize” students in ESOL—that is, to generalize their identity and character according to a rigidly definable set of linguistic or cultural traits. We are unable to define them in ways that are diametrically opposed to the language and culture of L1 students. ESOL students are no longer aliens to the English language or Anglo-American culture anymore. (cited in Matsuda, Cox, Jordan, & Ortmeier-Hooper, 2006, p. 216)

The hybrid nature of the cultures and communities in which L2 writers now reside is one that both Nero (2006) and Canagarajah (2006, 2007) have explored in their most recent scholarship. Nero (2006) considered the language experiences of bidialectal Caribbean-English speakers residing and studying in U.S. and Canadian colleges and universities who identified themselves as native speakers of English and were deeply conflicted by decisions made by instructors and placement practices that marked them as nonnative English speakers. Their experiences highlight the reality of English as a lingua franca in today’s world with multiple owners and multiple users, and the expanding use of English raises powerful questions for composition teachers and

administrators about the ways in which we approach writing pedagogy, placement, and assessment.

Canagarajah (2006, 2007) has called for composition studies to consider more deeply the impact of World Englishes on the teaching of writing, calling for a “pluralization of composition.” Drawing on Cope and Kalantzis’s (2000) concept of “multiliteracies,” Canagarajah notes that the new competencies required by new modes of communication, especially those influenced by the Internet, are changing the ways in which we teach and talk to our students about reading and writing. He argues that knowledge and acceptance of different varieties of English has a “natural” place in that discussion of multiliteracies and the ways in which we define texts in the writing classroom. Canagarajah and others have repeatedly called for paradigm shifts that embrace multilingual writers as a resource for the kinds of writing interactions that traditional, monolingual English users are encountering in the workplace and beyond.

Nero’s and Canagarajah’s works are emblematic of the evolving scholarship on World Englishes, which is profoundly affecting discussions on second language writing and composition, bringing together scholars across the two fields to engage in provocative conversations on the future of composition pedagogy and scholarship. These border-crossing discussions have added new opportunities and frameworks for the discussions of writers and identity that we explore in this volume.

Crossing Borders in Second Language Writing and Composition: The Future

The recent work in second language writing and in composition is encouraging; research in both fields shows a growing awareness and use of one another’s scholarship. In 2003, Ilona Leki noted the “insular” nature of certain disciplinary fields, even in those circumstances where we are often talking about the same students. She called for more research on second language writing that draws on “broader frames” and cross-disciplinary approaches (p. 105). Leki’s call was heard. In 2006, a special issue of *College*

English responded to Leki's call, edited by Min-Zhan Lu, Paul Kei Matsuda, and Bruce Horner, scholars in both fields. This issue addressed some of the most compelling problems that composition faces today, namely that the English composition classroom can no longer be imagined as a strictly monolingual space. Moving outward from the classroom and into administrative matters, a 2007 special issue of *The Journal of Writing Program Administration* focused on language crossing by scholars in composition and second language writing. In addition, journals across composition and second language studies have increasingly accepted the work of specialists in both fields. These special issues and trends in our journals have raised awareness about multilingual writers that will have lasting benefits to scholars and teachers across fields.

Reinventing Identities in Second Language Writing aims to continue this trend by furthering these cross-disciplinary conversations. As editors, we have striven to produce a collection that brings together the perspectives of second language scholars and composition scholars. We have also answered Leki's (2003) call to consider broader theoretical frames in our research, and the chapters here demonstrate a reaching out across disciplinary borders to see what other fields, such as the social sciences, might contribute to our understanding of writer identity. Our hope is that this collection not only begins to open up these conversations, but that it also serves as an invitation for further conversation and inquiry on writer identity.

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*R*einventing Identities in Second Language Writing explores how second language writers negotiate identity in a variety of academic and extracurricular settings. This collection offers diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives as well as second language writers' narrative accounts of how they construct identities through personal, school, and professional discourses.

A first of its kind, this book focuses extended attention on the identity complexities—including constraints and opportunities—inherent in second language writing. As student populations diversify—in both “mainstream” composition courses and across the curriculum—teachers, scholars, and administrators will benefit from this unique and valuable resource that displays the rich textures of the work that second language writers do to discover and construct their identities through the written word.



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