

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Binti Mohd Ismail, Tizreena and Rajeh Alsalhi, Najeh (2022) "Language Assessment and Writer Identity in Higher Education: A Qualitative Analysis of Labeling Learners through Placement Tests," *Information Sciences Letters*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , PP -.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/isl/vol11/iss2/43>

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# Language Assessment and Writer Identity in Higher Education: A Qualitative Analysis of Labeling Learners through Placement Tests

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Received: 21 Nov. 2021, Revised: 12 Jan. 2022, Accepted: 21 Jan. 2022.

Published online: 1 Mar. 2022.

**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the assessment process that labels the language abilities of students even before they begin their first year of undergraduate education at the University. The study was conducted in three ways: first, enumerating stances in the literature that demonstrate how institutionalized labels as a result of the assessment can lead to conflicting identities in students, especially in higher education; secondly, presenting qualitative data on assessment practices and their relationship in instilling a contradictory, deficit writer identity in students. Thirdly, arguing that assessment which labels students affect learner motivation and writer confidence of students ultimately creating negativity associated with the composition class. The study used a qualitative approach by interview as an instrument of study. Data was collected from the participants (n = 56) and analyzed via the coding technique. The results of the study indicated that assessment practices that label students contrary to existing perceptions of their language abilities lead to demotivation and lack of interest in writing classes for the first-year undergraduate. In light of this, we can consider the use of multiple instruments rather than a single standardized test as the preferred method in determining the placement of students in the appropriate writing course. Moreover, by gaining insight from the student's perspective, 'social justice and 'inclusion' can become a norm in the writing classroom. As instructors, we have a responsibility to promote effective and comfortable learning environments, and ongoing classroom research is the best way to advocate this.

**Keywords:** : Language Assessment, Writer identities, Higher education, A Qualitative Analysis, Placement tests, Learner motivation.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Statement of Interest and Agenda

"Well I don't...when it comes to writing I just write about what I feel or what I think about...I just write it down. But...eh...like to think that of...I mean ...it put me back in the 001 class. I passed all my years...like I never failed an English course before and over here the placement test...to put me back into the 001...is something bad for me, I..I felt that I'm not good..."

The above is a short excerpt from Khalifa (synonym), a Palestinian undergraduate student, who grew up in the UAE and did his schooling in an English medium school throughout primary as well as secondary school. The excerpt is data taken from an interview between Khalifa and myself, concerning his placement into the 001(beginner level)

composition course at the American University of Sharjah through the English Placement Test (EPT) administered to students during their first year at the institution. In my experience teaching various levels of composition courses at AUS for the last 5 years, I have noticed that the multilingual students in my writing courses have often expressed surprise and disappointment at having placed into 001 or 101 composition courses, which many of the students identify as being remedial writing courses. This has then been followed by disinterest and a general lack of motivation towards the composition classes and writing as a whole. Khalifa and students like him seem to associate placing into WRI 001 and WRI 101 (the lower level of writing courses) as having poor writing and speaking ability in the English language, some like Khalifa associate being placed into 001 as having failed English. The negativity that students demonstrate at being placed into the lower-level writing courses, specifically 001 indicates that students do not agree with the results of such placements tests and are unhappy with their placement into

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the beginner and intermediate level writing courses. My agenda in this study therefore is to investigate whether there is a contradiction between the way students perceive their writing proficiency and the institutionally ascribed one given to them via placement tests. My aim is to understand how such 'labeling' of writer identities affects learner motivation and the learner identity of students towards their writing class. As stated by Menard-Warwick (2005, pp. 254) literacy learning of a language in a specific social context impacts the identity of the learners. Therefore, questions as to whether students feel that they have to concede their existing writer identities for the institutionally ascribed identity, as a result of their placement test results are indeed valid in this context. I feel that classroom-based social research needs to continuously evolve to help language teachers understand and meet the needs of language learners (Norton 2005) more effectively.

### 1.2 The Study Problem

The University the research was conducted in, is an institution that is culturally diverse with a multilingual student body from over 87 different countries. The language of instruction at the institution is English, and a majority of the undergraduate students come from English medium schools despite being multilingual speakers themselves. The United Arab Emirates with its large expatriate population can attribute the diversity of its residents to the rapid economic growth due to the discovery and export of oil (Shihab 2001). Thus, the socio-economic features of the UAE include a minority local population, a large and continuously growing expatriate population, and an immense amount of wealth from the production and sale of oil. Admission requirements into the undergraduate program at the University the study was conducted in requires students to have passed the general proficiency tests like TOEFL or IELTS. However, in addition to the proficiency tests, all undergraduate students are also required to take an English Placement Test (EPT), assessing their writing ability before beginning their undergraduate study at the institution. The EPT is administered by the Department of Writing Studies and determines which level of writing course the student will place into. These include WRI 001 (Fundamentals of Academic Discourse) the lowest level of writing proficiency, often referred to as the beginner or pre-writing level, WRI 101 (Academic Writing) intermediate writing level, and WRI 102 (Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum) advance writing level. It is of note here that the WRI 001 course is a non-credit course, although students pay to take the course it is not calculated in their cumulative credit hours for the undergraduate program they are enrolled in. The EPTs require students to write an essay based on an article given to them during the test. The instructions in the test highlight the four main areas students will need to concentrate on in their essay including; length requirements, structural guidelines, structural requirements, and formatting requirements. Students are given 90 minutes to complete the

written test.

The placement tests are double and sometimes triple graded by full-time faculty in the Writing Studies Department in AUS, and they are graded according to a standardized rubric given out to all the graders. Each essay is evaluated by two different instructors, a third reader being made available for differences between graders of 2 or more points. Students who score between 0-3 are placed into 001 (beginner writers), those who score between 4-6 are placed into 101 as intermediate writers and a score of 7 or above would result in the student being directly placed into 102 as advanced writers. Knowing that composition instructors customize their level, amount, and process of writing instruction based on the level of writing class that students get placed into, it is important that writing instructors meet the linguistic needs of students without imposing predefined 'labels' on them. Despite being a rather small-scale study, it is hoped that the findings will allow writing instructors to understand if placement tests force students to concede their writer identities and how this affects the learner motivation and learner identity of students.

### 1.3 Study Questions

The study responds to two research questions:

RQ1: Do placement tests label the writer identity of first-year undergraduate students in the UAE?

RQ2: How do placement test labels affect the learner motivation and learner identity of the first-year writing students in the UAE?

## 2 Literature Review

Menard-Warwick in her review of literature on the way identity has been theorized in recent years in relation to language and education, acknowledges that there has been a growing recognition across the sub-disciplines of learning regarding the powerful and fluid ways in which the multiple identities students associate themselves with affect their learning (2005). Research has shown that English language learners engage in 'acts of identity' through the use of language revealing how their linguistic identities are constructed and perceived (Wenger 1998). Experts argue further that identity is ever-changing and multi-faceted, therefore posing numerous challenges for language pedagogy, especially in the language classroom due to the varied multilingual backgrounds and multiple identities that students associate themselves with (Lave 1996; West 1992). In the field of identity and language learning, many influential researchers have used the social theories of habitus and capital by Bourdieu and Foucault's explanations on discourse, in order to understand the issues related to identity and learning, (Menard-Warwick 2005, Norton 2005). Bonny Norton contributed significantly to this field by drawing on the work of Bourdieu in social theory and Weedon on theories related to subjectivity, (2000). Norton

defines identity as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand possibilities of the future" (2000, pp. 5). Norton theorizes that relations of power can both empower as well as constrain the identities negotiated by language learners in the classroom. Interestingly McKay and Wong in their article "Multiple Identities, Multiple Discourse" trace the dynamic and often contradicting multiple identities of learners. In their study, McKay and Wong (1996) relate the discourses and identities of Chinese immigrant students in California to the agency exercised by students in relation to positions of power both in school and in society. Research done in the field of identity also indicates that the identity of learners is subject to change depending on the context the learner is in, and that certain contexts can enhance or undermine students from learning. For example, McKay and Wong in their study found that identities associated with being 'good students' lead learners to a higher agency in academic language skills, (1996). Having come to understand from the literature mentioned above that identities are manifold, fluctuating and a site of struggle, the connections between identity and learning are important in crystalizing the *learner identity* of students. Norton (2000) in her study clarifies that learner difficulties related to *access* can arise from various aspects of identity such as gender, race, and social class. Menard-Warwick argues further that even when such questions of access are resolved, difficulties in learning due to identity conflicts that ensue from students having to take on new identities can be a depilating process. Hirono (2009) in her longitudinal study of an adult EFL learner who perceived himself as having difficulty learning English, explains learner identity as being differences inherent to the individual and the relationship between the individual and the context. Hirono argues further that schools and educational institutions play a crucial role in the construction of learner identities. She extrapolates that "Junior's identity as a poor learner strongly affected his behavior in the classroom" (2009, pp. 37). Forming a connection between learner identity and its effect on learner difficulty, Hirono posits that the identity ascribed to individuals by institutions such as the 'poor learner' one Junior associated himself with, can prevent students from acknowledging learning in the classroom. Nero in her study of how students position their linguistic identities in her MA-TESOL program claims that many institutions ascribe linguistic identities to students that are often in conflict with existing identities. She argues that such institutionalized 'labels'; firstly, assign linguistic identities as part of a sorting mechanism onto students, affecting the placement assessment of students itself and therefore the amount and nature of language instruction they receive, as well as the attitude of instructors towards students. Secondly, her study points out that such labels, self or externally ascribed, can lead to a mismatch between their intended and actual meaning for the student themselves; finally, Nero demonstrates that such ascribed meanings tend to shift with time and context, (2005, pp. 196). In her study, Nero argues that placement is a vital area affecting the

identities of language learners in institutions across the U.S. Her study discusses the different language assessment tools utilized in New York City for students who spoke more than one language. Although her study considers the shortcomings of some of these standardized tests, and questions the ability of such tests in assessing the full range of linguistic knowledge that students may possess, her study does not consider the impact such assessments have on the learner identity of students. Potowski (2004) in his descriptive study of the relationship between the academic success of ESL students at a large, public, urban college and their scores at the time of admission on basic skills tests in reading and writing, reported that the entrance scores of ESL students do not appear to act as good indicators of subsequent academic success. He found also that the most difficult test for ESL students to pass, the writing test, was also the least predictive. His study alludes to the findings of other studies reviewed here, that basing placement decisions on "a single score on any particular test" (Potowski 2004, pp. 738) is often an unfair and incorrect assessment of students' academic ability. Discussion in the literature about assessments, and the problems surrounding writing assessment is abundant. These studies highlight issues of reliability and validity, rater training, holistic scoring, whether direct or indirect methods should be used for testing writing amongst others.

Studies in the area of placements tests concur that such tests need to align with the course content the student may be placed into (Armstrong 2001). Armstrong argues further that writing assessments should be linked to the curricular; therefore, if students will be required to write as part of their coursework then they should write as a means of placement. Crusan argues further that a test becomes inappropriate if it does not result in the best available treatment or placement for students (2000). Harlkau (2007) summarizes that labels given to students in classrooms and institutions have consequences "for students' classroom behavior and ultimately for students' motivation or investment in English and academic learning" (2000, pp.38). These studies indicate that 'labels' positioned on students by institutions have an effect on the learner identity and motivation of students in their classroom. Therefore, in this context, it is relevant to examine how the labels resulting from the EPT's at the institute of higher education where the study took place affect the learner identity and the approach of students towards their writing class. It is appropriate for the purpose of this study for us to understand writer identities and how previous research has defined them. For the context of this study, the definitions given to learner identity as one that is "seen as socially, culturally, and historically constructed in the interactions the learner has experienced and is therefore subject to pedagogical intervention" (Hirono 2009, pg 46) is also in many ways similarly applicable to the writer identities of students. Most of the literature related to writer identities looks at the 'voice' of the writer (Tang & John 1999, Brooke 1991). Fernsten's interest in the emerging and constructed writer identity of young writers, who

struggle to gain a voice and positive acknowledgment from institutions, was a catalyst for my research within this area of teaching writing in Higher Education (2008). I was especially interested in Fernsten's findings of such institutional labels which branded young writers as being incompetent by those with little knowledge or experience with second language learners. I wanted to investigate if such labels and the struggles of undergraduate students in finding their voice against such ascribed identities were reflected in my own context of teaching writing to second language learners. I was interested to explore the writer identities of my students, the way in which they viewed their writing abilities, and the inherent perceptions they possess regarding their composition skills and compare the same with the intuitional labels placed on them. In line with previous studies that look at the institutional labeling of students and the effects of this on their learner identity and motivation, in this paper, I argue that such representations or institutional labels that are ascribed to students as a result of placement tests 'promote certain views of learner identity' (Norton 2000, pp.40).

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Study Approach

Informed by a sociocultural perspective and located within an interpretive, exploratory framework, this study looks at structure, agency, and transition in collaboration with individual and institutional identities in considering the impact of writing assessments on learner identities. This study also draws on issues in the area of testing and the labeling of learners, especially in the ESL context. Framed within an interpretive approach that sought to "yield insight and understanding of people's behavior" (Cohen et.al. 2011, pp. 18), the methodology of this research was an exploratory study. To facilitate a rich collection of data which according to (Lincoln and Guba 1985) can increase the validity of qualitative research, interviews were used as a tool for this study. Seeing as exploratory research is an attempt to unearth theory from the qualitative data obtained rather than from a predisposed hypothesis, such a methodology fits the purposes and aims of this study.

#### 3.2 Study Tools

Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection tool in this study to collect data. Investigators focused on the "individual as the main source of interpretation" (Troudi et.al. 2009: pp. 548), whilst developing a set of interview questions related to the study's purposes. Students were told that participating in the interview might take between 15-20 minutes. A convenience sampling method was used whereby "the nearest individuals to serve as respondents" (Cohen et. al. 2011, pp.155) were selected. Students from the four writing classes I was teaching (WRI 101) as well as students from four of my colleagues' composition classes

(WRI 001), were chosen as samples in the study. Moreover, Cohen et.al., note that interviews allow participants "to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their point of view" (2011, pp. 409). Despite interviews being a powerful tool for researchers, it is also important to note that they are specifically planned, constructed, and often susceptible to interviewer bias (Dyer, 1995). Students were asked to indicate if they were interested in participating in an interview and emails were sent out to schedule interviews with those who volunteered. Students were made to understand that participating in the interview would not have any impact on their grades for the Writing courses they were enrolled in and that the information they shared would be kept for research purposes only while maintaining their anonymity. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the researcher's office, on a one-on-one basis and each session lasted for 15-20 minutes. All interviews sessions were recorded by the researcher after obtaining the consent of the participants. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were organized around the research questions of the study and explored the experience students had with the placement tests, the way they felt about being placed in specific writing programs, whether they agreed or not with such placement, the way they described their writing ability and how this compared with their placement into different writing programs. The second half of the semi-structured interview focused on how motivated students felt to attend their writing classes, whether they enjoyed their writing classes and how their performance in the writing class has been thus far into the academic semester. Out of the four students who participated in the semi-structured interview, one student was placed into the WRI 101 writing course and three were from the WRI 001 course.

#### 3.3 The Participants

A total of 56 freshman students enrolled in the lower level composition courses (WRI 001 and WRI 101) took part in this study. This is an acceptable number of participants to generate qualitative data. Established ethical research procedures were followed in the distribution of questionnaires and the conduct of interviews. All participants gave written consent to use the data from interviews for publication and other study purposes. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants from the different composition courses and students were assured that the responses would have no effect on their evaluation and subsequent grade within the writing course they were currently enrolled in. The participants were from various Gulf countries, India, Pakistan, and the United States of America, amongst others. 72% of the student participants selected Arabic as their native language. A majority of the respondents (72%) of them completed both primary and secondary schooling in English-based curricular.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

By applying the 'progressive focusing' method developed by Parlett and Hamilton (1976) whereby funneling of information is applied to raw data, salient features of the situation are discussed in the study concerning the research questions. It is hoped that by using a conjunction of data collection methods "an externality" is given to the context of the study where the information collected can be corroborated by more than just a single participant (Cohen et. al. 2010, pp.541). The process was therefore both inductive as well as reflexive and a true account of the interpretations made from the available constructs. To avoid imposing the researcher's views on the data, the data were analyzed using exploratory content analysis (Troudi et.al., 2009). Emerging themes were categorized and codified. The analysis revealed recurrent themes, categories, and in some instances unique occurrences. To analyze all of this is of course beyond the scope of this study; however, themes were categorized according to the research questions of this study and analyzed via the coding technique. A discussion of the findings in the proceeding section is therefore organized based on the emergent themes in relation to the initial research questions that motivated this study. A total of three themes were identified concerning the research questions of the study and these include; the way students perceive their writer identities, the remedial writer identity labels positioned on students, and the effect of such labels on the learner identity and motivation of students.

## 4 Discussion and Findings

### 4.1 The Way Students Perceive Their Writer Identities.

The results showed that 76% of students report their writing abilities as being intermediate (WRI 101) and 12% said they were beginners (WRI 001) and the remaining 12% saw themselves as possessing advanced writing abilities (WRI 102). However, of the 56 students who took the interview 41 (73.2%) tested into an intermediate writing program (WRI 101), and the remaining 15 (26.8%) were placed into the beginner writing course (WRI 001). These findings indicate that most of the students feel that they are proficient in their writing abilities but were placed in the intermediate or beginner level writing program. Didah and Sameer both are cases in point here:

TI: And how would you rate your writing ability?

Didah: I write a lot well...confidently...I do a lot of different types of writing...free writing...about things...erm going around... politics, I really like to write about politics, erm...anything that...provokes people in general.

And the excerpt with Sameer:

Sameer: I'm a pretty good writer...

Didah was placed into the WRI 101 intermediate writing course whereas Sameer was placed into the WRI 001 beginner writing course. However, both of them describe their writing abilities as being *above* intermediate, as Didah says 'confidently' and Sameer 'pretty well'.

Understanding one's identity in general and writer identity, in particular, is subjective and often quite complex (Fernsten 2008). However, it is clear from the responses given by both cases that such definitions do not fall into the intermediate range, both students saw themselves as being above average writers.

By being placed into WRI 101 and 001 respectively which are beginner and intermediate writing classes, these students were placed into a composition course below and contrary to the way they perceived their writing abilities. In this situation, students conceded inherent writer identities and had to adopt one that was intuitively ascribed to them. Didah explains how she had always received A stars in English and thought of herself as an excellent student in the subject until she took the placement test and was placed into a low-level writing course.

Such impositions on the writer identities of students indicate to them that their writing competence is deficit and remedial. According to Fernsten (2008, pp.51) "students who are convinced they are 'bad' writers too often fall victim to the inaction that preys on those convinced that past failures predict future failure". Thus, by positioning these institutionalized identities on their writing abilities we are telling students that they are 'bad' writers even before they begin their composition courses. This 'labeling of identities that are contradictory to how students perceive themselves are a necessary requirement of most institutions. Placement tests are given to ascertain the correct writing level instruction is given to students. However, the question of how the results of these placement tests affect student perceptions of themselves and their learner confidence is something that is often overlooked.

Khalifa and Mania who were both placed into the WRI 001 relate how such a placement made them feel like they are "not good enough" and that they have "failed in English".

Khalifa: Well...I don't know...when it comes to writing...like I just...like write whatever I think...or like whatever I feel I just write it down...aaah...I take care of my grammar...but ...erm...like...having that...I mean to think of that... it put me back in the 001 class...I passed all my all my years...like I never failed an English course before and over here the placement test...to put me back into the 001...is something bad for me, I.I.I.I felt that I'm not good...

Mania: I think it is not so fair that I was put into WRI 001 if I had a better topic which I can express my opinion on...maybe I would have placed into WR101 ...erm maybe I'm not that good in English...I'm good but not that

good...I'm happy with my course now....but my friends...speak the same level of English as me and they were put into WRI 101...coz like so I was like... I'm that bad in English or what..?

Here we can see that similar to the study done by Fernsten in 2008 on *Writer Identity and ESL Learners*, Khalifa and Mania both seem to be convinced by their placement into 001 that they are 'not good writers'. Khalifa describes his placement as having failed in English, something he has never done before. With the results of just one placement writing test, the identity students had as writers, their confidence in the English language, and their inherent perceptions regarding their composition abilities seem to have all been affected negatively and to be replaced by an institutional one that has made them question their abilities and proficiency in the English language. It seems that similar to the findings of other studies (Fernsten 2008, Marshall 2010 and Harklau 2000), we at AUS are quick to judge these multilingual, multicultural students written language as being remedial as they "do not fit the standard" and are typically labeled as deficient, incompetent or even lacking in cognitive ability (Harris 1997). Not only do we force students to concede their existing writer identities based on the results of the placement tests, in several situations the test appropriated labels are remedial or deficient in comparison to inherent identities in students. The data from this study indicate that the way in which these students perceived their writer identities has been institutionally repositioned, which potentially affects their learner identity and learner motivation in intrinsic ways (Hirono 2009). Fernsten (2008) in her study argues that these ESL writers accept the judgment of institutionally ascribed labels, and continue to feel marginalized because of such labels. Such 're-labeling' of identities would possibly affect the learner identity and learner motivation of students. However, research exploring how 'labels' affect the learner motivation of students is scarce (Hirono 2009), specifically in exploring the 'labels' which are a direct result of institution-wide tests (Fernsten 2008). The next section of this paper collates the data obtained from surveys and interviews to see how students' learner identity and learner motivation are affected by such 'labeling' of their writing abilities.

#### 4.2 Remedial Writer Identity Labels

When asked whether the placement tests labeled their writing abilities, 62% of the students responded yes, they felt the placement test labeled their composition skills. Khalifa explains that he felt irritated at being placed into the WRI 001 class...despite being unable to change the placement and that he has "to just live with it" he claims that in class he feels like not talking to anyone as he feels that the other students 'don't know much'. He goes on to explain how the placement test affected his writing confidence.

TI: Has being placed into WRI 001 affected your confidence

as a writer in any way?

Khalifa: At first yes...of course yes...maybe...maybe of course whoever graded my paper knows better...about...if I...if I write good or not...maybe he or she thinks that I need to be like...better at writing...now ..now I'm ok with it...my professor's really good...but at the start I felt I failed English....and that...and that I'm not a good writer.

Didah who excelled in English her whole life, and was selected as the class Valedictorian at the British Curriculum School she went to, feels strongly that she was placed in the wrong course after the placement test. She says that she doesn't belong in her WRI 101 class, that there is a huge gap in her abilities and that of her peers, and feels she should have been placed into the WRI 102 course. When asked how placing into the writing 101 course affected her writing confidence she says;

Didah: It made me feel a bit bad...because I realize that I used to write so much more before...but I don't know if it's because I've started University so I have less time....or its because of the confidence level....but I would say both...yes both. I feel worried to write and feel I need to follow the guidelines...closely because I might make a mistake.

TI: How did you feel on the first day of your WRI 101 class?

Didah: It was different...than from high school. But I was surprised...to be in this class.... I'm not worrying about it...I know that I will move on...but I really didn't expect this.

Didah explains how she felt bad about placing into WRI 101 and that it could be a reason why she doesn't write as often as she used to before. This is not surprising, by being placed into an intermediate writing course Didah has been forced to rethink her writing proficiency and accept that she is not such a good writer after all.

Mania feels that her writing ability is average, intermediate. She says she can write an essay but not a 'professional' one. She says she disagrees with her placement in 001. When asked if the placement test affected her writing confidence she replied:

Mania: Yeah, it did. Because I'm an average student before I took the placement test I was sure I will be in WRI 101 the intermediate course...but I was shocked to see the grade...like...001...not a writing course but a pre-writing course...I'm not a pre-writer, I'm average...so I can be...I can be in WRI 101.

TI: So how did this make you feel to be in the 001 class?

Mania: I was like...so unhappy...when I look around...just so unhappy...

Mania's explanations of being forced to accept the instructional positioned writer identity of a pre-writer associated with placing into WRI 001 is further proof that students concede existing writer identities as a result of writing program placements. She goes on to say how this made her feel 'unhappy' in her writing class, which has significant implications on her approach to writing.

Sameer who was placed into 001 says that he feels like he belongs in the WRI 101 class. Therefore when he was placed into the 001 remedial class instead, he just accepted it and went on. He feels like being in the 001 remedial writing class is repetitive for him and "condescending". It made him doubt his writing ability; he isn't sure how the class can help him but says 'let's see'. He feels that the level of work in the 001 class is of a much lower level than what he did in high school and that it isn't challenging enough for him.

Similar to previous studies, the findings of this study suggest that writing placement tests ascribe labels on the writer identities of students sometimes in contradiction with existing identities (Harklau 2000, McKay and Wong 1996, Costino & Hyon 2007). The following section examines the implications of such institutionally positioned labels on the learner identity and motivation of students.

#### *4.3 The Remedial Writer Identity Label and its Effect on Learner Identity and Motivation of Students.*

Williams and Burden posit that learner identity is "the way in which individuals view the world and their perceptions of themselves within the world, particularly within a learning situation, will play a major part in their learning and construction of knowledge" (as cited in Hirano 2009, pp.34). Therefore, the confidence students had in their writing and how motivated they feel towards writing, would be directly related to how they perceive themselves as writers. From the interview data provided above all of the students felt that the placement test put them into a writing course that was below their writing ability. Such a placement made them feel unmotivated and alienated in their writing class. The findings in this study suggest that there is a resistance to learning and a lack of motivation amongst the students towards writing and their writing class as a result of the placement tests (Hirono 2008, Fernsten 2008 and Harklau 2000). These placement tests are "at the heart of how entering students are placed and evaluated in college language programs, they have significant educational implications" (Harklau 2000, pp. 68). Sameer's responses to being placed into 001 as 'condescending' and Khalifa's feelings of irritation towards the 001 class, shows that students approach their writing class with 'negativity' which stems from being (from their point of view) unfairly assessed. Tarnopolsky (2000) states that demotivation in learning writing emerges from the absence of an immediate need for acquiring writing skills; this description of being demotivated is of relevance to this study. The four students

in this study felt that they were placed in a writing course beneath their writing ability and approached their class feeling dejected and certain it will most probably not be able to add to their existing knowledge of writing. Not only did the results of the placement test indicate to these students that they are 'poor writers' but by placing them in a class they felt was remedial, students now felt demotivated and unhappy to learn writing in these contexts. Such 'negativity' towards the writing class often manifests in resistance and learner difficulty in students and their approach to writing (Harklau 2000, Ortmeier-Hooper 2008). Ortmeier-Hooper argues that "the institutionalized labels that are placed on second language students have a profound effect on how they define themselves in the college classroom and in their writing" (2008, pp.93). While such labels are ephemeral, conservative, and often contradictory to existing perceptions of identity, such representations exist in all institutional settings (Ortmeier-Hooper 2008). Power figures prominently into the exercise of labeling, as shown in the findings of this study, relationships of power lend a greater sense of authority and a greater sense of reality to some labels so that in certain instances the labels ascribed by the educators and institutions (powerful and authoritative figures) superimpose existing identities inherent in students. What can be done then to minimize the effect of such labeling leading to a lack of motivation and resistance towards the writing class? The alternative suggested by Elbow (1996) in questioning the necessity of placement tests in the first place is not feasible, as the necessity of placement tests in matching a student with an appropriate course has been established by previous research (Leki 1991, Crusan 2002). Whilst placements are an important institutional process and cannot be removed from the recursive process, it is necessary that such tests are carried out with more attention to "who is being tested and how these persons might be affected by the results of the tests" (Crusan 2002, pp.20). Thus, I agree with Crusan that as educators we must be knowledgeable and constantly explore assessment practices to realize the pedagogical, social, and political implications of the tests we administer to our students. By acknowledging that the assessment of writing is complex, instructors need to play an active role in the evaluation and subsequent categorization of their students' writing abilities. Some institutions have begun asking students to submit a writing portfolio instead of the placement test. The portfolio which contains several writing excerpts of students done over a stipulated period of time is demonstrative of the writing abilities of students and can be used to place students in appropriate writing courses. Such approaches can be more time-consuming and labor-intensive for writing faculty, but offer a viable alternative, albeit one that needs to be explored in tandem with placement tests. The portfolio approach, for example, offers direct involvement in the dynamic process of assessing students. Assessment procedures need to be constantly explored and evaluated to ensure that such procedures are able to meet the needs of their students (Crusan 2007) and the results of this study are an attempt to contribute towards this end. Placement tests are needed for



several reasons as highlighted in section 2 of this study, the goal of this study is to offer an insight from the learner's perspective, into the way in which placement tests and their labels are internalized by students. Therefore, the aim of this research is NOT to undermine placement tests, but rather to explore the possibility of incorrect and contradictory labels being imposed on composition students.

## 5 Conclusions

In this study, we set out to examine how remedial writer identity labels positioned institutionally upon students affect the learner identity and motivation of students towards their writing class. The analysis revealed that students do potentially go through a process of conceding existing writer identities in place of an institutionally positioned one because of placement test results. In the case of the participants of this study, such repositioning of identities was largely due to labels resulting from placement tests, which are sometimes contradictory to how students perceive their writing abilities. More importantly, the findings of this study indicate that such remedial writing labels result in a lack of motivation and 'negativity' towards the writing class. I believe that the study findings can usefully inform both institutions of higher learning that administer writing program placement and the curricular practices of writing instructors. The study findings indicate that results of placement tests could sometimes lead to students harboring negativity and demotivation towards writing classes, leading to learner resistance in the classroom. Such a situation needs to be explored and studied further.

The possibility that the placement process subjects learners to labels that associate negative and contrary writer identities to students in place of existing, more positive ones could potentially lead to a learner block and negativity to the class itself, as demonstrated in other similar studies (Hirono 2009, Fernsten 2008). The positioning of remedial writer identities in place of inherent identities before beginning writing programs could be a significant cause for the lack of motivation and resistance displayed by students enrolled in WRI 001 and WRI 101 courses. Echoing findings of previous research, conflict may result when students are placed into writing courses that are contrary to existing perceptions of their abilities (McKay and Wong 1996, Costino & Hyan 2007, Marshall 2005). In most cases, institutions of higher learning and faculty overlook the cause for such negativity and resistance demonstrated by students in their writing class. Exploratory studies such as this one are not to replace the placement test, but instead, provide a platform for the learner's perspective to be considered. Additionally, they also provide an opportunity for assessment practices to be evaluated and allow faculty to become more sensitized to the needs and perceptions of their students. By understanding *why* students are sometimes demotivated and negative in their writing class, instructors would be better equipped to address such instances of

resistance to learning. Exploratory studies show that classroom research is a necessary part of the education process and such ongoing investigations potentially lead to more successful learning environments for both instructors and learners (Thesen, 1997).

It is important to recognize here that although such institutional labels have significant implications on student motivation and classroom behavior, these ascribed writer identities are dynamic and continuously recreated through classroom interactions among teachers and students (Harklau 2000). There is nothing static or unchanging about these ascribed writer identities and students work together with educators in the composition classes to continually structure and re-structure their writer identities in a process that involves agency and transformation. The significance of this study findings is therefore not as a need to remove assessment aimed at placing students into specific courses in colleges, but rather as a call to other educators to become aware of the impact such practices have on the learner motivation and approach of students to their writing class. In conclusion, this study supports Thesen's (1997) call for greater institutional and educator awareness on how the process of labeling students' writer identities in contradiction with inherent writer identities can manifest a lack of learner motivation and resistance to the writing class. By encouraging instructors to reexamine the labels students are positioned within their writing class and increasing awareness on the negative writer identities that students approach their writing classes with, it is hoped that instructors would work towards curricula that are sensitized to recognize and address the needs of such multicultural, multilingual students.

## 6 Implications

Some educational implications for future research on the impact of placement tests on learner identity and learner motivation in the writing classroom:

- The findings of this study could provide insights into the development and improvement of placement tests as a standardized admission process into writing courses. This study highlights the need to constantly review and evaluate assessment processes, especially ones that are administered homogeneously for all students. Through the increase in such like-minded studies that provide a review of such processes, there is more possibility in improving such placement tests, whilst making them more sensitized to the needs of learners.
- There remains a need for further exploration of learner labels that associate negative writer identities to students, potentially leading to learner block and negativity to the class. Although this study does not dismiss the need for placement tests, it extrapolates the possibility of learner

disassociation due to existing negativity, a case that needs further study and research.

- There is also a need for quantitative, empiric studies in assessing the labeling of learner identities and their impact on the learner motivation of students.
- There is a need for further research into the conflict that arises when learners are placed into writing classrooms that are contrary to their existing and inherent writer identities, the impact of such circumstances on learner engagement, motivation, and performance.
- This study highlights that exploratory classroom research is necessary and should be carried out intermittently on all aspects of teaching and learning, but in particular on assessment practices to make the learning process more inclusive and effective in the long term.
- Finally, more studies that acknowledge and allow the learner to voice their opinions, perspectives, and experiences, which are easily overlooked by educators are necessary for the field of teaching and learning. Research acknowledging the learning experiences of students and understanding such points of view lead to effective learning environments.
- Research on how teaching and learning processes affect learners should be an ongoing necessary part of the education process, there is a call for more of such research in this area.

## 7 Delimitations of Study

- *Subject limits:* The study was limited to only the placement tests of first-year undergraduate students from four writing courses (WRI 001) and (WRI 101), during the Fall intake of one academic semester.
- *Human limits:* The study was limited to students at the American University of Sharjah, registered for WRI 001 and WRI 101.
- *Spatial limits:* the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.
- *Time limits:* Fall academic semester of the academic year (2019/2020).

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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