WCES 2012

Individualized voiced in undergraduate writing in English as a foreign language
Abbas Zare-ee a *, Navvab Hematiyan b, Sajjad Askari Matin b

aAssistant professor, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran
bM.A. in TEFL, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran

Abstract

The contexts within and through which both individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity or self-understanding is central to cultural studies as well as to the study of language use. In studies on writing in a second language, the representation of identity and individualized voice has been the concern of recent research in this area resulting in the analysis of its academic and nonacademic as well as practical and theoretical foundations. Inner beauties, emotions, biases and preferences in writing have been used to rate the intensity of the representation of voice in second language writing. This study aimed at reviewing some theoretical background on individualized voice in writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and at illustrating identity and voice representations in EFL writing. 42 undergraduate EFL Learners (36 women and 6 men) at a major state university were randomly selected for the purpose of data collection. As part of their paragraph writing classes in three subsequent sessions, they wrote English texts on three topics. The participants EFL writing ability was measured using composition profiles and institutional records. The presence and intensity of individualized voice in their writing was examined as well using Helms-Park's and Stapleton's Voice Intensity Rating Scale, randomizing and anonymizing samples for the raters to avoid bias. Tentative results indicate that identity and voice are represented through EFL writing and that different demographic variables such as gender and writing ability level contribute to individualized voice in EFL writing.

© 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Voice, identity, culture, writing;

1. Introduction

Talking about culture, identity, voice and their subparts and subcategories is not an easy job because of the complex nature of the concepts. In this study, the focus is on the theoretical and practical foundations of these three important issues as relates to learners English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an EFL context. Defining culture, especially in different contexts can have different meanings and contributions. But, in cultural studies, the central point is the same as anthropological studies. Culture is seen as a complex worldview we face every day. One of the crucial elements we encounter every day is using language. In this regard, two key cultural elements are the capability of mankind in building and utilizing their language. There is a long-standing mutual relationship between language and culture. These concepts and their relations pose controversial questions: How can language represent culture? And also, a broader question; what is language? Language is a single word but needs a compilation of books to introduce and cover its different aspects. The definition of language is beyond the scope of the present

* Abbas Zare-ee. Tel.: +98-913-363-4757
E-mail address: zare-ee72@kashanu.ac.ir
work, but mentioning one thing here about language can contribute to the necessary background knowledge. There are many pictures of language. From a common-sense standpoint, language might be as a vehicle for the communication of thoughts (Sedgwick 2002, P182). Macroscopically, it is true. In this respect, special cultures give birth to special languages, but thoughts and beliefs are not necessarily related to a specific culture. Simply denying the one language, one culture equation brings up another problem i.e. intercultural relationships and challenges. On a simple occasion, when a learner wants to learn a foreign language in an EFL context, he/she is easily confronted with a dilemma. Students then want to keep their identities safe. The practice of reserving something of oneself from the clutches of an institution....this recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defense but rather an essential constitution of the self (Goffman, 1961, P319).

The concept of identity is central to cultural studies. "In so far as cultural studies examines the contexts within which and through which both individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity or self-understanding" (Edgar, 2002, P160). There have been numerous studies in this area. It may seem bizarre to have a practical aspect in the study of theoretical arguments. In some theories, representation is a function of language, let say representation of thought in language. Then representation of identity in language is also possible. Representation of identity has different perspectives; ethnic affiliation, national identity, social identity, political identity, citizenship, individual identity, cultural identity and so on. Even, Hyland (2011) in his study discusses the representation of self in an academic homepage.

Through a review of some of the papers in this area, we may see what has been done on matters relating to identity and its representation. There is an informative and profound study on the basis of subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses and critical thinking by Canagarajah (2004). Canagarajah raises the question of how students could learn English while maintaining membership with their vernacular community and culture? Maintaining dual identities may become counterproductive to students of second or foreign language. These students set up their own safe houses to keep their local identities safe. It appears that minority communities have always collaboratively constructed sites of community under life wherein they can celebrate suppressed identities and go further to develop subversive discourses that inspire resistance against their domination (Canagarajah, 2004). Language socialization and political identity has been clarified by Friedman (2011). Friedman delved into the impacts of socialization in another language on political identity. Combining micro-analytic attention to talk-in-interaction and longitudinal ethnographic data would allow the researcher to see how conversational and embodied structures fit into histories of activity and identity-making (Olinger 2011). Among these diverse forms of representation of identity, the focus of this study is on the academic writings of students in an EFL context. In fact there is considerable scope for the negotiation of identity in academic writing (Hyland 2002). It is clear that students cannot leave their personalities at the door of their classrooms. It is up to the teacher to make an atmosphere that students express their own opinions and ideas freely and break the impersonal nature of academic writing. A piece of writing is the work of a student. We should let them represent their voice and agency. The inclination of guidelines toward writing transforms this beautiful and challenging activity to a very strict and dull process. “I believe...”, “In my opinion....”, “it is my opinion...” and such kind of expressions should be eliminated in students writing based on popular conventions and guidelines of writing. Style guides and textbooks commonly portray scholarly writing as a kind of impersonal, faceless discourse, and EAP teachers direct students to remove themselves from their texts (Hyland 2002). Since the first day students come to the university, they are required to adapt themselves to the expectations of the university and teachers. It is difficult for students who have come to class with diverse identities to accept a single identity and express their identity as others want not as they want. In his studies, Hyland focuses on rhetorical consciousness to raise students’ awareness of what they do themselves.

Voice or representation of identity, whatever it is and whoever says that, is very reverent and respectful for their owners. So, academic contexts should show great respect and admiration for it. Recent research on academic writing has revealed the intersection of writing and identity construction. Abasi, Akbari, and Graves (2006) studied discourse appropriation, construction of identities and the complex issue of plagiarism in ESL students writing in graduate school. They argued that student textual plagiarism could best be viewed as an issue of authorial identity. Another study done by Friedman (2011) goes deep into socialization and political identities as discussed before on the impacts of socialization on political identities.
One key figure, who has done many studies on identity and its different dimensions, is Ken Hyland (e.g. 2005, 2011). He examined the presentation of self in scholarly life in the study of identity and marginalization in academic homepage. In another study, he criticized the imposition of conventions on students writing. He mentioned that students should express their voices without any limitations. These were also empirically studied by Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003). Our study on its practical aspects depends mostly on the method and design of this research. This is an empirical study with pedagogical implications. Our study also, is an empirical study with the quick consideration of cultural issues related to identity. Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) elaborated the components of voice and their impacts on identifying the strength of voice representation. Underlying these suggestions is the assumption that individualized voice is generally possessed by L1 writers and that L2 writing lacking such voice may be judged as falling short of native standards. (Helms-Park, Stapleton, 2003). Aiming to add to this work, this study adds some other variables and observes their effects on voice representation in undergraduate EFL writing.

2. Method

2.1. Research Questions

1) Do components of voice, based on L2 writing literature, correlate with the quality of EFL writing?
2) How is individualized voice related to the identity of EFL writers?
3) What is the relationship between the sense of identity and writing ability of EFL learners?

2.2. Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data for this study; one was used to measure the writing ability of participants and the other was used to measure the factors attributing to the presence of voice in their writing. For the measurement of the writing ability and quality of writing there are not many instruments available in the literature, however the TOEFL Test of Written English and ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, 1981, et al) are the most commonly used instruments that are pedagogically applicable (Park & Stapleton, 2003). Since there were many difficulties in the interpretation and scoring of these instruments, an analytical rating of overall quality and writing ability of participants was taken by a university lecturer who has been teaching writing to EFL University students for almost a decade.

In order to measure the individualized voice, two similar attempts were located in literature. Yeh (1998) classified voice as mature and immature which was a broad measurement of voice (Park & Stapleton). Deremer (1998) proposed another classification of voice as appropriate and inappropriate. For the best choice to an analytical and objective measurement of voice and its components that could be related and compared to writing ability and quality of writing, Park & Stapleton (2003) adopted an instrument based on a careful isolation of features of voice from the literature; “voice Intensity Rating Scale (VIRS)”. Theoretically, VIRS classifies elements of voice into two levels and four scales:

- Sentence level Scales.
  - Assertiveness, established through linguistic devices such as hedges and intensifiers
  - Self-Identification, established through the use of first-person pronouns and using active structures.
- Paragraph level Scales.
  - Reiteration of Central point, how often and how explicitly the main argument is rearticulated.
  - Authorial Presence and Autonomy of Thought, overall presence of the author’s voice and to account for quality of identity in writing.

For the measurement of the four scales, since we don’t know how and to what these factors weave together for weighting scores, an equal weighted level would be the safest side (Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Therefore, the equal measurement of each category and the sum of the four categories associates with a percentage is the measured as the
voice of an individual. To secure the reliability of the rating procedure, raters were trained to use the VIRS and then were asked to pilot the scales together to resolve the difficulties and uncertainties.

2.3. Participants

In this study, 42 undergraduate EFL learners from a university in central Iran participated voluntarily; 36 women and 6 men. All of them were non-native speakers of English and their first language was Persian and shared the same ethnic Farsi background. 22 of them studied English Translation and 20 studied English Literature and all were enrolled in EFL writing courses designed for a Bachelor’s degree requirement. As these students were admitted to regular programs of university, randomization and distribution of them in terms of language proficiency and gender was impossible. However, all of them had passed Azmone Sarasari Zabane English‡ as a university entrance English proficiency test.

2.4. Writing Task

In this study researchers focused on the argumentation due to the fact that prior studies also focused on this genre and it has been identified to be central for university writing (Helms & Staplton, 2003; Reid, 2001). Specifically, the main objective of writing was to enable students to write a composition during which they were barely guided through the process of writing, prewriting-planning, drafting, revising and editing (Aziza and Baba 2011). The writing task for this study was majorly undertaken by the course instructor. The assignment consisted of three composition tasks; subject of each was selected by participants. An oral prompt prior to each composition task was presented by course instructor then participants were asked to write a passage on the subject arguing in favor or against the issues related to the writing prompt. Writing tasks were given to participants after four weeks of the course beginning and continued for three weeks (each week one writing task). The course instructor was informed of the real intention of researchers (related to voice) but the students did the activity as part of class requirement. After the writing task all the papers were collected and randomized and were made ready to be distributed to raters.

2.5. Rating Procedure

When we assess writing, we engage in another complex and multifaceted activity: judging another person’s text (Liz Hamp. Lyon 1995). The bio-data of collected papers (126 papers, each participant 3 paper) was removed therefore raters had no access to identity, gender and, background knowledge of participants. The collected papers were also mixed, randomized and, separated in two groups so that rates could not have a background of the classes as a whole. Raters were asked to rate papers of one group. Each participant’s paper was rated by the two raters for voice intensity using VIRS and a third rater, rated all of the 126 papers for writing ability using composition profiles and institutional records.

Prior to rating Procedure, the two raters were trained in two sessions each lasting half an hour. All of the details of VIRS were elaborated and raters piloted a range of papers. The mean score of the two raters for each paper was supposed to indicate the final score of each paper.

3. Results

Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure inter-rater reliability ($a=.89$, $p<0.05$) between the two raters. The Spearman Correlation coefficient was used two see whether there was a correlation between voice and quality of EFL writing. So far, the analyses of the results indicated that the intensity of the representation of voice in the

‡ Azmone Sarasari Zabane English is a nation-wide Standardized proficiency test designed for university entrance admission, a minimal requirement for students enrolling for study of translation or literature of English at undergraduate level in Iran.
component of assertiveness was positively related to the quality of writing. The results have been shown in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of voice</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>R(with writing quality)</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>57.37</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identification</td>
<td>41.63</td>
<td>8.46</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reiteration of central point</td>
<td>49.94</td>
<td>8.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy of thought</td>
<td>55.23</td>
<td>13.01</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analyses of the results also indicated that the intensity of the representation of voice varied across genders only in the fourth component where male learners showed significantly greater autonomy of thought. The results confirm that voice is an important feature of EFL writing and that its intensity can vary across learner groups.

4. Discussion

Good argumentative writing for learners of English as a foreign language is infused with voice. These learners need to master linguistic and rhetorical devices that they can use to express their authorial voice and to claim ownership of their texts. Attention to this can be a very necessary component of writing classes. Further research need to clarify how the strength of the manifested ownership of a text (voice intensity) will represent identity.

References

Canagarajah, S. (2004). Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning
Goffman, 196, p. 361 qtd.