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## Understanding Issues of Voice and Identity for L2 Writers of English

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### Abstract

This article brings to attention the issues of voice and identity in the setting of L2 writing, particularly L2 writers of English. Theorists have often defined the terms voice and identity within the framework of their particular viewpoint. This can have far reaching effects for the L2 writers and what is expected from their produced text. Often these expectations are far removed from an L2 writer's experience writing in their L1. The expressivist theory promotes authenticity and individuality in writing connected to the inner-self, whereas the socialist theory sees a writer's voice in a situational context. How then does a L2 writer navigate the expectations of their audience? It is critical for both teachers and learners to understand relative viewpoints regarding voice, identity, individuality and social factors in L2 writing. Researchers may well play a key role in increasing this understanding. However, reaching a consensus has often been difficult due to various factors. This article details some of these difficulties and synthesises some ways in which they have been overcome to bring some agreement within the research community. It is hoped that an understanding of these various ideas connected with voice and identity in L2 writing will help align future pedagogy to the reality many L2 writers face when it comes to expressing their individual written style along with content.

### INTRODUCTION

The question of an L2 language learners's voice and identity is an issue of great interest and has generated ample research. However, the particular question of how voice and identity influences L2 writers' composition of English is still an area of research that is relatively neglected. One of the reasons for this may be due to the terms voice and identity being difficult to actually define in an agreeable way in this context. Often these terms are used synonymously or in an indistinguishable fashion. This is compounded by the nebulous notions of individuality and vague ideas regarding social aspects that also affect L2 writing. These viewpoints may also take the form of the way the L1 and L2 cultural identities of a writer are understood. Consequently at times L2 writers may be implicitly or explicitly required to forego one or more of these elements in favour of a dominant or prevailing model. Therefore, for researchers, teachers and learners alike, it is vital to recognize and understand these issues and work towards a flexible and culturally aware view towards L2 writing. It is hoped, this results in viable research, pedagogy and application based upon these views.

### INDIVIDUALITY IN WRITTEN VOICE

Stewart (1972) suggests that principally in the written context, the one factor separating all humans is their individual authorial voice. Elbow (1981) describes voice in writing as that which “captures the sound of the individual on the page” (p. 287). Bowden (1995) describes Stewart and Elbow’s definitions of written voice as part of the social and educational reactions born in the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which gave birth to the expressivist school of writing. The expressivist goal being orientated towards producing text through self-exploration, honesty and humanism.

Bowden (1995) explains that the expressivist view of written voice focuses on being authentic and personal, and it is made up of three characteristics. The first is that written voice should be connected to the inner-self, *vis a vis* “inner voice”. The second is the premise that oral communication holds dominance over written communication. That is to say, one may express one’s own unique inner-self more easily in speech than in writing. Writing is then seen, according to some expressivists, as a lower form of speech with voice trying to emulate oral tone and what Elbow (1981) calls the lack of “sound and texture” (p. 288) in text. The third characteristic is that of written voice favouring a literary style. Elbow (1981) when giving examples of what is personal written voice often cites texts from literary works. Trimbur (1994) complains that in terms of pedagogy, students who display skill in composing self-revelatory personal essays are at a distinct advantage with the expressivist teacher, even though it may have been a created authorial voice persona having to conform to teacher expectations. The very situation the expressivist ideal seeks to avoid.

### SOCIAL ASPECTS OF WRITTEN VOICE

The traditional expressivist view of voice has often been the most pervasive in the academic English context. Indeed Canagarajah (2002) and Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) suggest, rather unhappily, it is the expression of individuality and uniqueness of the writer that is the most important aspect of written voice in Western countries such as the U.S. and Britain. However, the definition of written voice as being a unique individual’s expressive potential has been criticized by many, including those holding social constructionist views (Malik, 2010). But the idea of written voice itself cannot be ignored and alternative definitions have been formulated. Situational written voice is one such alternative. Ede (1989) describes situational written voice as wearing different clothes for different occasions. So a writer’s voice would employ a strong personal voice when writing a personal essay. But when writing a report the writer would employ a more formal public tone. This resonates with the idea that people in general have many “masks” or personalities that they swap around all day everyday, depending on the social or cultural setting, and so being subjective in writing is to be expected. Foucault (1980) describes the nature of people at their core is to have multiple rather than unitary personalities.

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic and linguistics scholar, can be credited with being one of the first theorists to try and define the concept of voice. Bakhtin (1986) suggested that language is made up of utterances, and that these utterances are dependent on the perspective, values and nature of the person who produces it. Bakhtin called this metaphorical concept “voice”. Although Bakhtin’s concept was primarily concerned with oral language, Wertsch (1991) posits that it equally “... applies to written as well as spoken communication, and it is concerned with broader issues of a speaking subjects perspective, conceptual horizon, intention and world view” (p. 51).

Like Ede (1989), Bakhtin (1986) believed the voice of an individual is made up of many or multiple voices due to the fact that all utterances or texts (i.e. produced language) are responses to an “other”. That

is to say a dialog, with the “other” in this case being previous utterances or text. He goes on to say that therefore all utterances or text contain borrowed or appropriated language. In other words language is made up of a “collage” of borrowed language from other users, and therefore a writer’s voice is multiple, reliant on social factors and complex.

Ivanic and Camps (2001) also agree that voice can indeed be social and this aspect must not be overlooked in the L2 writing context. Prior (2001) goes on to suggest that voice can be both individual and social simultaneously owing to the fact that discourse is fundamentally situated, indexical and historical. This idea of voice being part of a social environment and not only existing in isolation is one that Stapleton (2002) points out as important in the context of L2 writing. Matsuda and Tardy (2007) go on to say that voice is seen as an important element especially in the postmodern era where the recognition of diversity in society is a key foundation.

To summarise then, the traditional model of written voice (based largely on the expressivist school of composition) sees it as the expression of the individual. Whereas the Bakhtinian model believes voice to be collaborative between the writer and the audience and as such socially influenced, then there are those like Prior (2001) who believe voice can be both individual and social at the same time. In any case the issue of voice is a complex one.

### **DIFFICULTIES OF RESEARCH ON VOICE**

Whether individual, social or a mixture of both, Atkinson (2001) still bemoans the fact that voice remains “a devilishly difficult concept to define” (p. 110). Research on voice in writing has been limited due to, as Stapleton (2002) argues, the often indefinable and vague qualities that are attributed to voice. Even Elbow (1999) himself concedes that the intrinsic meaning of voice is difficult to pin down, saying it is “a dimension of text that is rhetorically powerful but hard to focus on: the implied and unspoken meanings that are carried in the text but are different from the clear and overt meaning in the words” (p. 336). Vollmer (2002) also acknowledges that research on voice is difficult due to “the slipperiness of some of the concepts set forth by sociocultural theory” (p. 2). She goes on to say that the problems are compounded by the fact that there is still little agreement on what is actually meant by voice, identity, the self or culture.

Matsuda (2001) has attempted to give voice an operational definition, which he believes could be a basis for more empirically orientated research on written voice for L2 writers. He suggests “voice is the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available, yet ever changing repertoires” (p. 40). Matsuda clarifies that “discursive” features include form and content. Textual form consists of sentences structures, organisation, transition device usage and word choice. Textual content includes topic choice, examples chosen and argumentative strategies. Non-discursive features include, formatting choice of font type and size, use of margins, punctuation marks, and blank spaces between words, lines, paragraphs and block quotes.

However, even with an operational definition such as Matsuda’s (2001), the research on L2 writers’ voice that has taken place has tended to be qualitative in nature with many ethnographic biographical or autobiographical case studies being carried out and almost invariably in the context of English academic writing. This is perhaps owing to the still elusive and not easily agreeable definition of what voice actually is. Notable examples of case studies include Casanave (1992), Fox (1994), Hirvela and Belcher (2001), Leki (2001), Li (1996), Lu (1998) and probably the most well known being Shen (1998). Even so, there have also been some notable attempts to carry out quantitative studies on L2 writers’ voice. Some researchers have tried to elicit pedagogical focus by attempting to identify linguistic features of a writer’s voice. These include Hyland (2001, 2002a, 2002b), Ivanic and Camps (2001), Matsuda (2001), Prior (2001), Russell and Yoo (2001) and Tang and John (1999).

### VOICE AND IDENTITY

As shown in the previous section of this article, the issue of written voice in L2 writing is difficult to define. This is often compounded by the fact that traditionally researchers in the field often use the term “writer voice” interchangeably with “writer identity”, creating definitions, which fail to properly distinguish between the two. Examples include Hyland (2001) using the term “authorial presence” and the use of “authorial identity” by Hirvela and Belcher (2001). Although strongly related, it is this author’s belief that voice and identity are not always the same thing in the context of L2 writing.

Written voice is inherently found in the format and text of an L2 writer defined as best as possible by Matsuda (2001) and Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999). That is to say, voice is constructed by the linguistic and rhetorical resources that an L2 writer uses (Vollmer, 2002). Whereas identity although expressed in the text within an L2 writer’s voice, would also include how the L2 writer sees themselves outside of the text or how they position themselves socially in multiple ways. This is especially true of the writer’s L1 identity (real self identity) in relation to their L2 writing identity (discourse identity). The factors that must be considered include sociocultural aspects, audience expectations, genres as well as individuality. Therefore, it would be fair to say that although an L2 writer’s voice is often shaped by their identity when writing in L2, that identity may be different from the writer’s L1 identity. Furthermore the writer’s L2 identity may be totally different from their L1 identity constructed to produce an L2 voice or it may be a hybridization of the writer’s L1 and L2 identities. Some researchers such as Canagarajah (1993), Currie (2001) and Spack (1997) have recognized these differing identities within an L2 writer and the dichotomy of “real self identity” and “discourse identity”.

### CULTURAL IDENTITY AND VOICE IN WRITING

Cadman (1997), Casanave (1992), Fox (1994), Hinkel (1999), Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999), Atkinson (2004) and to some extent Connor (2011) in an adjusted fashion, have all claimed that an L2 writer’s cultural identity can restrain the production of individualized voice that is often required when writing in English. Especially in the typical English dominant setting of academic writing where the individual voice is valorized and championed (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). This may not be the case in the L1 culture of an L2 writer of English.

Satfire (1992) has compared voice in text to individual “style”, being almost without words, rather something in between the words. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) counter this by saying individual voice in writing most certainly involves some linguistic communication. They go on to say that in “native” English or English-dominant countries such as the U.S. or Britain, voice is where individuality is championed and represents linguistic behaviour, which is “clear, overt, expressive, and even assertive and demonstrative” (p. 161). Whereas for many people of varying cultures around the world this view is not shared. Many cultures, which are not English-dominant, do not have the same linguistic model for voice. In fact they may hold views that are exactly the opposite, and are a reflection of their own cultural identity. For example they may base their communicative interaction on a model where the written voice (and indeed oral voice) is represented in a “subtle, interpretative, independent, non-assertive and even non-verbal character” (p. 161).

Fox (1994) echoes much of what Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) describe as the differences between the notion of written voice in English-dominant countries and that of voice in other countries and cultures. Fox suggests that the written voice model where individuality is most prized, is in fact in the “world-minority” and it is the other more non-assertive model of voice as described by Ramanathan and Atkinson

(1999), which is a “world-majority”.

An example of this second model of voice often cited is the case of Japanese writers, where what is left out of a text is often more valued for what it does not directly express, rather than what it expresses overtly. There have been many studies carried out researching this aspect of the Japanese communicative model including Hara (2001), Hinds (1987), Ito (1980), Kobayashi (1996), Loveday (1982) amongst others. It is interesting to note in regards to voice in the written context, what is left out is comparable to the oral context in Japanese where silence is the “norm” (Ishii & Bruneau, 1994). This is a model of communication, which is shared in China and much of Asia according to Fox (1994), Harklau (1994) and Shen (1998) and even by some North American Native Indian tribes (Crago, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

### **CULTURAL IDENTITY AND CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC**

Kaplan’s (1966) pioneering study in contrastive rhetoric was one of the first pieces of research to try and explore the issue of L1 cultural identity of writing and how it interferes in L2 English writing. Kaplan described how English native-speaking audiences often found L2 English writing at times illogical, ambiguous and sometimes incomprehensible relative to L1 English writing. He points the finger at the encroachment of L2 writers’ L1 rhetorical patterns, based on cultural identity, in their English text. These non-English L1 rhetorical patterns, which include organisational structure that mirrored the writer’s perceived cultural identity, were often difficult for native English reading audiences to understand. Kaplan’s (1966) study investigated over seven hundred L2 English compositions by various writers and tried to find the differences and patterns of L1 and L2 idiosyncratic rhetorical forms.

Kaplan established five diagrams of differing linguistic identity characteristics, which he called “cultural thought patterns”. The five patterns described were English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance and Russian. According to Kaplan, English speakers write using a linear structure and support their theme with specific details. Kaplan then describes and contrasts the rhetorical thought patterns of the other languages. Semitic learners compared to native English writers were found to employ considerably more coordination words and write as a series of parallel constructions that were usually coordinated rather than subordinated. Oriental learners (which Kaplan uses to mean Asian learners, specifically Chinese and Korean) displayed a somewhat illogical structure as seen by native English writers, usually encircling the topic. Romance learners often drifted away from the main themes and provided seemingly irrelevant descriptions according to native English writers’ expectations. According to Kaplan, Russian learners too often digressed from the main theme in a zig-zag fashion between extraneous and relevant material. All of these rhetorical patterns Kaplan believed stemmed from the L1 cultural identities of the L2 writers of English.

Kaplan’s initial contrastive rhetorical model has been frequently criticized (Connor & Johns, 1990; Kubota, 2002; Atkinson, 2012; Canagarajah, 2013). It is often targeted as being overly simplistic, ethnocentric, static and is negatively characterized as being a movement associated with structural linguistics and behaviourism. Another major criticism has been that the native English pattern, it seems, is shown to be normative and the only acceptable model, with any other pattern deviating from it often being labeled illogical or erratic. Kubota (2002) in particular argues against a monolithic representation of Japanese culture and rhetoric. Also the fact that many languages were omitted in the study has been a cause of concern for many. However, Panetta (2001), Connor (2002) and Kubota and Lehner (2004) have attempted to revise Kaplan’s original model and bring it up to date and in line with the current models of cross-cultural research. What cannot be denied is Kaplan’s models did indeed make cognizant the need for understanding the influence of L1 culture and identity on the production of L2 English writing.

## CONCLUSION

This article has endeavored to describe and highlight some of the issues of voice and identity in the context of writing and in particular of academic English writing. Although there are many definitions of what voice or identity actually is or should be, and they are difficult concepts to agree upon, what cannot be denied is that they do impact on L2 writers of English. The dominant view in many academic English settings is that voice should project an identity of individuality, uniqueness and assertiveness, a view that may have its roots in the expressivist school of writing. More recently a sociocultural model for identity and written voice has emerged with studies such as Ede's (1989) and Ivanic and Camps (2001) basing their views on Bakhtin's (1986) model of dialogic voice.

Also Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric has tried to build models of rhetorical patterns that writers of L2 English employ from their L1 cultural backgrounds, often leading to misunderstanding and rejection by native English audiences. Although often criticized as being ethnocentric, nevertheless it would seem that Kaplan's motives were more egalitarian, bringing to the attention of native English writers the idea that their way of organising English texts is not the only way. Conversely, this has been interpreted negatively by some researchers such as Kubota (2002) and Canagarajah (2013) as simplistic and a way to essentialize L2 writers of English.

The aim of this article was to emphasize some of the concepts and ideas of voice and identity that many of us as teachers and researchers may *feel* we understand, but often the understanding of these ideas is deeply anchored to our own personal identity and voice as writers. This of course can differ from individual to individual and can be rooted in cultural and sociological positions. In terms of pedagogy factors as a teacher, or indeed as simply a reader of texts produced by L2 writers, one must navigate along the writers's voice, identity and individuality that may or may not be embedded within a background or hybridized background we may be unfamiliar with. The first step to appreciating the voice and identity of an L2 writer may well be understanding that diversity is to be expected.

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