“I hate the ESL idea!”: A Case Study in Identity and Academic Literacy

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This case study of an undergraduate student in a Canadian university analyzes her resistance/acceptance of practices and possibilities for participation in academic discourses. Analyzing her responses to feedback on her writing, this study shows the strategies she engages for negotiating her multiple and contradictory identifications as she learns to write.

Cette étude de cas est centrée sur une étudiante du premier cycle dans une université canadienne. Ses réactions (résistance et acceptation) à des pratiques et à des occasions de participation au discours académique sont analysées. En analysant les réactions de l’étudiante aux commentaires portant sur ses rédactions, l’auteure démontre les stratégies qu’elle emploie pour négocier ses identités multiples et contradictoires pendant son apprentissage.

Introduction

The site of academic writing today is a nexus for several powerful forces: the internationalization of higher education and of English; the increasing heterogeneity of university populations; and poststructural, postmodern challenges to traditional ways of representing and legitimating knowledge (Jones, Turner, & Street, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Pennycook, 1994). These forces elicit official and unofficial discourses about the so-called *problem* of student writing and a corresponding solution in a *skills* approach to teaching academic literacy. Recent research into academic literacy challenges the conceptualizations of language implicit in such approaches and interrogates the regulation of meaning-making in academic discourses (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001, 2003; Silva & Matsuda, 2001). Rather than viewing language as a transparent conduit for meaning to be possessed and produced by an individual—the assumption behind a skills approach—language is understood as constructing meanings. Academic discourses are situated in historical, cultural, institutional, and social contexts in which meanings are contested (Lea, 2005). Reading and writing in university are defined as “socially situated discourse practices which are ideologically inscribed” (Lillis, 2003, p. 194). From this understanding, the increasing diversity and destabilization of higher education can be seen as an opportunity to raise questions about the nature of the academy and its reading/writing practices.

As Jones et al. (2000) argue, we need to rethink higher education and academic literacy not in terms of skills and effectiveness, but rather at the level of epistemology, identity, and power: What counts as knowledge? Who decides? How is the self and agency constituted in academic reading/writing practices? How does the academy present its activities as neutral and given rather than partial and ideological, particularly in requirements for and assessment of writing? These broad questions resist the marginalization of those categorized as nontraditional students, and of writing support, as somehow outside legitimate scholarly activity and point to central cultural, ideological, and epistemological issues at the heart of reading/writing practices in university. These concerns are shared by composition theorists in the United States (Bazerman, 2004; Lu, 1992); New Literacy Studies researchers in the United Kingdom (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001, 2003); and North American genre theorists (Giltrow, 2002a, 2002b). Although many studies analyze academic discourse practices and composition pedagogy, there is a lack of research that presents the perspective of student writers (Lillis, 2001). In order to address practices that limit educational possibilities for nontraditional students, it is important to understand how student writers negotiate conflicting identities as they struggle to appropriate academic discourses (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

The purpose of this research is to explore the process of appropriatingtituted in academic r2ud04).

writer is both subject of and subject to discourse (Weedon, 1997). Giddens (1984) suggests that rather than taking up a ready-made social position, one engages in practices of "positioning" (p. 84). Theorizing the recursivity of agency and structure, Giddens sees both as ongoing, active processes rather than as fixed entities. Such an understanding of the contingency of social action underlines a poststructuralist view of identity as a fluid, reflexive project. Hall (1996) describes the incomplete and contradictory processes of identification, pointing to the importance of accounting for how

> individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the "positions" to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and "perform" these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves. (p. 14)

Thus as students learn to participate in academic discourse communities, they are negotiating a complex process of both identifying and not identifying with the positions offered to them. One of the positions offered to student writers at university is that of second-language writer, or more commonly, an English as a second language (ESL) student. My study shows how one student engages in what Hall terms a "constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating" this position. In the next section, I discuss difficulties with the use of *ESL* as a way to position students.

The Problematic Position of *ESL*

In his study "The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability," McDermott (1993) describes how the available category *learning disability* (LD) was waiting to be filled by Adam, a child who is variously able in elementary school situations. McDermott follows Adam through various elementary school activities and shows how certain practices seem especially well arranged to display his failure to meet certain standards and thus to provide a ready candidate for the position of LD student. Similarly, we can see that the *ESL* label serves the function of locating deficit, and for students *summoned* to this position, it may stereotype them and limit their possibilities.

Arranged for the benefit of schooling and institutional practices, for example, for the allocation of funding and resources, *ESL* remains a major organizing category in educational discourses despite critiques that it distorts and obscures historical and social contexts (Cook, 1999; Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Thesen, 1997). Studies show that the *second language* assumed in the label *ESL* may actually be a third or a fifth: learners may be multilingual; or a learner may not have a full grasp of any previous language

or may identify as English-speaking (Leung et al.; Nero, 1997; Toohey, 2000). Thesen, writing about Black South African students at university, shows that the way students are labeled often does not correspond with how they identify themselves, even though the labels stick and constrain how they are received. Leung et al. (1997), studying multiethnic urban classrooms in the UK, found that students labeled *ESL* identified themselves as English-speaking. Nero, in her study of Anglophone Caribbean college students, shows that some speakers who identify as English-speaking may not fit in either the native speaker or the *ESL* category. Toohey found that one of the supposedly *ESL* students in her study set in primary classrooms in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia really used only one language: English.

Students are always engaged in positioning, not only being positioned by others. Leung et al. (1997) emphasize the importance of attending to how learners "actively construct their own patterns of language use, ethnicity, and social identity" (p. 544), which often contradict the reified and fixed identities attributed to them. Their study in multiethnic urban classrooms found that existing categories and notions of "the idealized native speaker" (p. 544) failed to take account of the hybrid identities of postcolonial diaspora that characterized the students' own language affiliations, allegiances, and backgrounds. These hybrid identities affect how students make meaning through texts and may conflict with dominant academic practices (Lu, 1992).

Learning to Write

As students learn to write in university, they are confronted by "normative or regulative rules" (Hall, 1996, p. 14) that define their relations to academic discourse practices. Attitudes toward second-language learners and their writing, Severino (1998) suggests, can be mapped along a "continuum" of "political stances": separatist, accommodationist, and assimilationist (p. 189). The separatist position holds that cultural and linguistic minorities should not have to change: discrimination against these speakers should change instead. In terms of responses to writing, a separatist position would emphasize fluency and meaning and celebrate cultural differences, including differences in rhetorical patterns. Such a position, Severino points out, can leave students ill-prepared for situations that require standard English usage. In opposition to this stance, Severino describes the assimilationist stance, which regards linguistic deviations from standard English as errors to be eliminated. Severino favors an accommodationist stance, which in her view blends the best of the separatist and the assimilationist positions. In this stance, the goal is to acquire new linguistic competence without losing previous knowledge. With this enlarged linguistic repertoire, students are able to draw on varied types of language use, and diverse languages, as appropriate on various occasions.

Severino's (1998) accommodationist stance does not necessarily include a critique of the social relations that deem some speech appropriate and other

every turn; and at almost every turn, the normative position *ESL* student must be confronted.

Case Study: A Student's Experience

This case study focuses on the experiences of one undergraduate student, Susan (her choice of pseudonym), who at the time of the study was taking courses in business administration and Latin American studies. I had met her originally six months before as my student in a first-year academic writing course taught through distance education. After the course was over, Susan and I met at the university's writing center and began an exchange: I worked with her on her drafts for her new courses that term, and she agreed to share her writing with me and to allow me to interview her.

In addition to three one- to two-hour interviews with Susan, which took place over the fall term, my data also included several textual sites: her written drafts and papers, instructor's and writing center consultant's written responses to her, and assignment descriptions. I conducted, taped, and transcribed the interviews myself and coded data for emerging themes. For purposes of analysis, I divided the data into three sections. In the first section, Susan responds to my description of my tentative research plan. Her responses surprised me and shifted the direction of my inquiry. The second section covers Susan's initial response to my question about what she needed to support her learning of writing. Again, her responses influenced me and deepened my interest in issues of identity that may arise for second-language learners. This section also includes my follow-up interview with her. This gave her an opportunity to read and review the transcripts I had prepared, to discuss (and/or challenge) my interpretations, to reflect again, and to report her further interpretation of her own words in the first interview. This type of checking helped to strengthen my analysis and also provided an opportunity for "catalytic validity," which Lather (1991) describes as opening a potential space for increased self-understanding and transformative action. The third section of data includes interview excerpts; Susan's early draft of a paper; a writing consultant's written response to her on this draft via electronic mail; and the final, marked copy of the assignment. This was an assignment for a course in business communications. I present some of Susan's interpretations of the revision suggestions for her draft and her choices for revision. I also analyzed the final version of her paper to see how she implemented, or refused to implement, both the instructor's and the writing center consultant's suggestions. This reflexive methodology enhanced the strengths of a case study approach, which provides rich details about specific contexts of learning.

Susan's background shows her complex social location. A 27-year-old undergraduate student from the Ukraine, she began learning English in school at age 6. She graduated from university in the Ukraine with a degree

how I was doing it but I was wondering how other people were doing it, you know? I was curious, I mean … [voice drops, pause].

Susan: Yeah. (Pause). Probably for me it's, uh, a little bit (hah—breath out, pause) too much personal, I'd say. Because, uh, I'd say, like, when you hear a comment on the style, "Well, please excuse me for being an English major and for being picky," then you kind of really question your own identity, and your own being there, and so on and so on. (Pause. Hmmm of agreement from interviewer can be heard in the background). And so we're all clichéd to some extent. Saying that you're an English major I think is a cliché that probably gives you the chance to, not punish, but to judge people. And it probably doesn't really give you a chance to dig deep into the problem.

In this excerpt, Susan resists being categorized, or as she puts it, "clichéd."

Susan reports her acceptance of this suggestion, saying that it will “give a better understanding.” Her final version breaks up this sentence, although not exactly as suggested.

The consultant also comments on two instances of article usage: *the* before “securities portfolio management” and *an* before “extreme popularity.” In both cases, she writes, “I don’t think you need the article [*an* or *the*] here.” Susan comments on the *an*: “As again, articles are always my problem … [she reads] ‘an extreme popularity.’ It’s singular; so, I think I should have an article.” In the final version, Susan leaves in the article *an*. (On the final marked copy *an*

identifications as a good student, past English major, and *ESL* student positioned in relation to a native speaker.

Conclusion

This case study calls into question the intelligibility of received categories (such as *native speaker, non-native speaker*, and *ESL* learner) and shows how they affect the educational experiences of an undergraduate student struggling to attain academic success. This study also shows how one learner both resists and accepts writing instruction (responses to her writing by a writing consultant). She negotiates how she is positioned and how she positions herself, animating her discursive history to counter the limiting position of *ESL* that she faces. Even though such classification may assist in obtaining resources and support, I argue that the use of *ESL* (as in *ESL student, ESL writer, ESL learner*) is problematic. In addition to often being inaccurate, it has become associated with a deficiency that needs to be *fixed*.

Various solutions to this *problem*, described by Severino's (1998) range of "political stances" (p. 198) toward acculturation, generate varied educational practices. The extreme assimilationist position, which attempts to make second-language learners into native speakers, echoes Susan's answer, "To become a native speaker." This painful statement, along with the recognition that it is not possible to become what she is not, is situated in discursive practices that discriminate against speakers who deviate from the norm.

Cook (1999) argues against using the reified categories of *native speaker* and *nonnative speaker* in understanding language learning. Because by definition someone who learns a second language can never become a native speaker of that language, native speaker status remains an impossible goal. To counter the *deficit* focus and monolingual dominance implicit in *nonnative speaker*, he posits instead the concept of *second language user* (L2 user) and suggests that it is more useful to think of those using a second language as multi-competent. However, *native speaker* still remains a powerful position in discourses of language learning, and Susan negotiates her identity in relation to it.

Susan also finds the separatist approach that Severino describes lacking. She sees through its intent—"good enough for an ESL"—an overtolerance of deviation that will not prepare her for the advanced education she is pursuing. The solution of accommodation, using one's diverse linguistic competences appropriately as the occasion demands, tends to ignore the power relations that determine who decides what is appropriate when, where, and for whom. However, an expanded repertoire is necessary. To pretend otherwise would be to ignore existing structural inequities. An expanded repertoire needs to be accompanied by critical thinking about language and its usage. Such a critical awareness about language was suggested by Susan's use of irony in her statement: "[What I need] is to express myself at the level

which is *acceptable* as normal by native speakers." She does not say that she needs to attain a fixed standard of English, but rather recognizes that what is acceptable is a norm determined by the speech of the dominant-class native speakers.

Mapping out an economy of language and power, Bourdieu (1991) demonstrates that language use "likely to be recognized as *acceptable*" is that variant spoken by those of high social status: "holders of the legitimate competence" (pp. 55, 69), whose linguistic products set the norm. For too long certain native speakers of English have claimed the dominant competence. However, these normative practices, these norms, are maintained and reproduced (or not) by daily discursive practices in institutions and can be subverted by the agency of participants in their daily choices, attitudes, and actions (Giddens, 1984). The norms for appropriate academic language use can be resisted to varying degrees in varied contexts. Institutions of higher education are undergoing rapid changes, and alternative epistemologies and identities are unsettling academic discourses. Teachers can contribute to alternative practices and possibilities by recognizing and legitimizing the multicompetence of their students.

Students are quite capable of producing both legitimate and insurgent readings, of playing the game for success and sustaining a critical resistance (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995); in doing this, students draw on their diverse "discursive histories" (p. 57). Susan drew on her multiple identifications as a good student and a past English major and tutor to help her resist how she was positioned as "an ESL." She took pride in her own work. She had "loved" her paper on abortion, which she felt expressed her ideas well, even though it had not received a high mark. The choices Susan made for revision also reflected her negotiation between contradictory positions: as "an ESL"

academic discourse communities and suggests that further research into second-language learners' identities and perspectives is needed to better understand their struggles. In supporting these students, as teachers we can encourage a critique of the ideological assumptions that undergird academic literacy, acknowledge diverse sources of knowledge (not only academic knowledge), and explore multiple readings or ways of interpreting the world. In looking beyond the label *ESL*—or any category that confines our view toward students—we can create conditions that foster expanded possibilities for all participants. Part of this project involves being open to the challenges sparked by the resources and insights of students.

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Appendix
Research Ethics Considerations

In this appendix, I offer a few reflections on ethical issues that arose as I designed and conducted this research and on my attempts to enact more reciprocal and respectful research practices. In addition to the usual power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, other inequities were present in this research. I had been Susan's teacher, and although I was no longer in this position during this research project, this status lingered. This became immediately apparent in the first interview when Susan addressed me as one of the teachers who stereotype ESL writers. Also I was clearly researching the other: in terms of the native/nonnative speaker binary, I was by definition a native speaker of English, whereas Susan, despite her expressed desires to be like a native speaker, was by definition a nonnative speaker of English. This research has shown that although we may deconstruct this binary and demonstrate its lack of descriptive validity and theoretical rigor, it still has powerful effects. So I was aware of my sites of privilege in relation to my research participant. Acknowledging these inequities, I still am committed as a researcher to face these dilemmas, and rather than being paralyzed by the dangers of inquiry, to engage them from a perspective of "exploring new methodological economies of responsibility and possibility" (Lather, 1998, p. 19). In this study, I tried to involve my research participant (Susan) from the beginning in the research design, sharing with her my tentative research questions and asking for her input. I also shared the transcripts of all interviews with her, and we discussed these. This recursivity and reflexivity influenced the direction of the research and I believe strengthened its validity. Of course, as researcher, I was benefiting from these dialogues with Susan. My offer of free consultation on her assignments that term was an attempt to make the exchange more visible and to show that she was providing something of value. I also hope that her development as a writer was assisted by the opportunity offered by her participation in the research to attend carefully to her own writing and to instructors' feedback. However, my name is on this article, not hers; my analysis gains the final word. Acknowledging and addressing ethical issues in ethnographic research is necessary, but even the best intentioned and most carefully conducted research is not without these and other limits and dilemmas.