The purpose of this study was to investigate the writing identity of students who are English Language Learners in the writing classroom. This group of students is often misunderstood. Because of this it was important to ask: What identities do these students bring into the classroom and how do those identities differ from their English-only speaking peers? Another aim was to find out if their cultural backgrounds influenced how and what they write in their work. Additionally, it was explored what could be done pedagogically for this group of students. Research was also done based on what other scholars and compositionists had to say about the writing identity of English Language Learners. Qualitative research was done on three students in a yearlong first-year writing course. Interviews were conducted and their work was analyzed. It was found that students who are English Language Learners do indeed bring into their writing several identities that were influenced by their cultural surroundings. For example, the male students brought with them patriarchal views and the female student was found to be aggressive and political in her writing though she did not intend this to be so. Finally, this study suggests ways that writing instructors can help their students who bring in multiple identities into the writing classroom.

Martha Martinez
May 2013
ELL WRITING IDENTITY: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC INFLUENCES IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

by

Martha Martinez

A thesis
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APPROVED

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING WRITING IDENTITY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Overviews</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS AN ELL STUDENT AND WHY DO THEY WRITE DIFFERENTLY?</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions Used to Analyze Identity</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Agency: Positioning Themselves Inside the Academy</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL Writing Identity</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: GETTING TO KNOW THREE ELL STUDENTS AND THEIR WRITING</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheng</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: CRITICAL AWARENESS OF ELL WRITING HABITS</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being and Sounding Different</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Thinkers</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of Not Being Original Thinkers</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Instructors Can Help</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO ELL STUDENTS</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a Balance Between Cultures</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: EMAIL TO STUDENTS</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: LIST OF QUESTIONS</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: STUDENT CONSENT FORM FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH .......................................................... 90

APPENDIX D: GETTING TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND YOUR STUDENTS’ CLASSROOM ACTIVITY .......................................................... 94
CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING WRITING IDENTITY

I hear comments from teachers all the time about how bad student writing can be, and I am just as guilty of saying these things. Some writing instructors can look at a less than satisfactory piece of student writing and only see errors. It can be easy to dismiss a student as being lazy or as not knowing how to write. It is easy to dismiss a student for something she is not. It is actually much easier to label an English as a Second Language student as having “ESL issues” and move on to reading the next paper in a large pile of essays not giving a second thought as to how to help them other than sending them to an ESL classroom, linguistics classroom, or correcting some of their errors. We can easily say that a student does not belong in our class because he/she is not a native English speaker.

This thesis is about students who are English Language Learners, or ELL. I chose this label because it is the most accurate in describing the type of student I refer to here. An ELL student is one who is culturally and linguistically gifted in a language other than English and is still acquiring the English language. Traditionally, an ELL student can and may enroll in English as a Second Language courses and is still learning how to speak, read, and write English. However, ESL students are those who speak English as their second language and I do not wish to limit my research to those who only speak two languages—English being the second—but I wish to include students whose English acquisition may be their second or third language or beyond. ELL students can either be immigrants, American born, or international students. The term ELL is not a new term and it has been used in the past to describe students who were not proficient in English, however, proficiency is not the reason I chose to use this term in this thesis.
A newer term, Generation 1.5, was coined to describe students who were immigrants as children and had most of their schooling in the United States. Originally, Rambaut and Ima used the term in their report of Southeast Asian refugees to describe the experiences of that generation (Harklau and Siegal). Compositionists who use this term generally refer to students who are in between first and second generations. But, I take issue with the term Generation 1.5 because it too has become a broad way to describe students. It is sometimes used to describe students who are immigrants and sometimes it describes students who are still actively learning English (taking ESL courses), while other times it even describes second-generation students (Schwartz). Gwen Gray Schwartz believes that the term “Generation 1.5’ is overused and its meaning has been diluted so that it no longer serves to be very useful in identifying, describing, and placing such students” (43). Schwartz prefers to use the term “cross-over student,” which is a subset of Generation 1.5, because it specifically refers to Generation 1.5 students who enroll in mainstream composition courses (44). The type of student Schwartz describes brings into the classroom at least two different cultures and languages and cross over between them and must overcome obstacles (44). This term accurately describes the three students I used in this research, but then again so do Generation 1.5 and ESL in the sense that English was the second language that they learned to speak.

While I understand that the terms Generation 1.5, ELL, and ESL can be very broad, I decided that the term ELL is best to use because it best describes my students as well as many of the students who attend CSU, Fresno: they bring with them different cultural and linguistic backgrounds other than white and English. In this thesis I use scholarship in which authors refer to students as ESL, Generation 1.5, and ELL. My intention is not to clump these students together or blur the line
between these different types of students. I chose to pull from these different scholarships that use different terms because they are all useful in helping me point out the different cultural and linguistic identities that multilingual students bring into the classroom. In addition, I also use them to show that these are not negative labels in themselves, but can be harmful to students if these labels are used dismissively.

If teachers have made up their minds and label their students’ writing remedial, or deficit model writing, then no progress can be made in regards to learning from the students. I would argue that there is value in having students who are generally labeled “basic writers” or “remedial writers” in the writing classroom so that we as teachers can learn from them and the cultural identities they bring into the classroom. Instead of focusing on the stigma that comes with remedial students, or in my case ELL writers, teachers can benefit from the writing experiences those students bring into the classroom. By doing this, compositionist Linda Adler-Kassner says, writing instructors now work against the deficit model that surrounds writing instruction (76). She says we must work with these students and show them that they are not isolated. For example, she chooses articles for her students to read that they can identify with. My students have read Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” from her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* so they can see that others have had to let go of one language and conform to another, although in Anzaldúa’s case she didn’t entirely assimilate as she writes in both English and Spanish. The point is that teachers can learn from these students who bring with them multiple languages, identities and backgrounds into the classroom. These students can help shape how we talk about literacy in a way that includes them as well.
If teachers realize that ELL students carry with them a complex set of identities into the writing classroom, then teachers and students would be able to work together to make ELL students better writers. What writing instructors already know is that writing is an act of identity. The focus of this thesis is just that: writer identity. However, I am not interested in the vague “be yourself” in your writing. I am specifically interested in ELL students and the different aspects of identity they bring into the writing classroom. I also want to show that ELL students and their English-only speaking peers have varying discourses and different aspects that make up their writing identities.

The university values a privileged discourse. Students who have been exposed to the language of the academy early in their academic careers are at an advantage. David Bartholomae addresses privileged discourse in the academy. In his review of student placement essays he discovered that the successful students were those who use privileged and specialized language in their essays (153). He placed students at an advanced stage of writing when they had established “their authority as writers” (emphasis his). Bartholomae said that students claimed “their authority, not by simply claiming…that they have done something creative, but by placing themselves both within and against a discourse, or within and against competing discourses, and working self-consciously to claim an interpretive project of their own, one that grants them their privilege to speak” (158). Higher learning institutions have set up obstacles for students who are still learning English. Placement tests and essays are examples of this. They are designed to see which students can be placed in mainstream courses and which students are placed in remedial, basic, or ESL courses, all of which have a stigma attached. The university values the students who are able to point to different discourses and
establish themselves as members of these discourses, something that some ELL students are not always able to do as easily as their peers.

ELL students are at a disadvantage because they may not have had the same opportunities as their native-English speaking peers. ELL students are often labeled as bad writers, dumb, unable to comprehend or grasp another language (in this case it would be English). As I will explain further down, I myself had to face these misconceptions in school. Admittedly, ELL students often make mistakes in their writing, but placing too much weight on these mistakes is not helpful to the development of these students. While I worked at the Writing Center at the CSU, Fresno campus, a student came in and showed me a grading sheet, a rubric, of how her essay was scored. The point-based rubric relied heavily on grammar and sentence level issues, which is why the student came in for help. Her grade depended on how many of these mistakes she made in her paper. While she was not an ELL student, I can only imagine the difficulty an English language learner would have in this situation. An ELL student who makes a lot of mistakes would have been in danger of receiving a bad grade. ELL students should not be treated lesser than their peers; that they sometimes are treated this way is part of the disadvantage in the classroom. Their writing should not be dismissed as less than acceptable, but seen as something that can be worked on and improved by both the instructor (the feedback) and the student (revisions).

What I want to make clear in this thesis are three things. First, I would hope that teachers remain open-minded about ELL students and their different—not bad—experiences they bring into the classroom. As I mentioned above, I’ve heard other teachers say they think their students are bad writers and some teachers are quick to label their students as such. By remaining open-minded teachers would be able to see that these students actually have a facility for languages. But what else
can teachers do to understand and help their students? How exactly do we keep an open mind and what to we do after that? In my final chapter I address these questions.

Second, students who are still learning the English language sometimes feel their teachers do not understand them. It is because of this misunderstanding that ELL students sometimes feel that they don’t belong in the university. This feeling does not necessarily come from teachers, but from the set-up of the institution. In many cases ELL students come from a working class family. The university is a middle class institution—I would consider state schools middle class and private universities upper class institutions. While, of course, nobody says to these students that they are not welcome, the bourgeois experience of the university is not something all ELL students are familiar with. An important question to ask is: How can writing instructors help with making students feel they belong in the writing classroom?

Lastly, I focus on the writing identity of these students. I believe that teachers must acknowledge and understand that ELL students’ identity is a bit more complex than the English-only speaking students. Understanding that different identities exist in the writing classroom will help us be conscious of and address students’ needs better. As Adler-Kassner points out, choosing a text that the students can identify with comes from understanding the backgrounds of the students. So, what is the significance of writing identity in the classroom? I hope to answer that in the following chapters, because I think it is very important for teachers and students alike to understand that there are multiple aspects of identity in the classroom.

In order to address those three points I did qualitative research on three students in a year-long first-year writing course. The First Year Writing Program
at CSU, Fresno is a Directed Self-Placement program that offers students the opportunity to meet the English requirement in a two-semester stretch course. Students make their own decision about what English course to take. If they choose the stretch option, students take English 5A for one semester and after successful completion they move on to English 5B the following semester. The other option is English 10 for one semester.

I was a first-year Teaching Associate in the program and I recruited three of my own students—Mary, Mo, and Sheng— from my English 5A course during the Fall 2011 semester to help me with my research. I collected all of their work including emails, in-class writing, Blackboard responses, essays, homework and all other writing done for my class. I read and analyzed all of their writing. I specifically looked for areas where they shifted identities and where their cultural experiences influenced how and what they wrote. I did not ask them to do any writing outside of the course for my research. I interviewed each of the three students individually and I kept a running email correspondence with all three of them.

In order to look into the writing identity of students, I wanted to find students who did not speak English as their first language, who spoke English most of their educational career and who were either first generation or moved to the United States at a young age. In other words, I was looking for Generation 1.5 students. What I found in my three students were what Schwartz called “cross-over” students. I wanted this particular type of student so that I would be able to ask about language experiences in school here in the U.S. All three students I

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1 All three are pseudonyms per their request.
2 All the writing included throughout this thesis was left as is. I chose not to make corrections in the quotes in order to give the readers a sense of what my students produced for my class.
spoke to were born in the United States and spoke a language other than English as their first language. They all learned English at a very young age. They were all so young that they did not recollect learning the language, only that they learned it when they started school here in the United States.

I have a lot in common with my students, and because of that, I have a personal stake in this topic. As an ESL student myself I often wondered why I couldn’t produce the same quality work as some of my peers. While at this point of my educational career I believe I am fully capable of writing at the level the university expects me to, this wasn’t always the case for me. I already knew I spoke differently, but I also wondered if I wrote differently because I was an ESL student (enrolled in ESL courses) and currently consider myself ELL since I still continue to acquire knowledge about the English language. I also knew that unlike my English-only speaking peers I spoke very little English outside of the classroom. I read and wrote mostly in Spanish. For a few years English wasn’t even my second language of choice. Early in my college career I met a friend at work who spoke French; at that time, I was fluent in French and French became our language of choice. In my experience, English was only spoken at school. It wasn’t until I moved away from my parents’ home, away from my French-speaking friend, and transferred into a university that English became my predominant language. English is now my predominant language, but, whenever I visit family, or speak to them on the phone, the language that is mostly present is Spanish. I knew there were other students who shared my language experiences so I decided to look into how this could affect the writing of ELL students.

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3 I was born and educated in the U.S.; however, English was not my first language. I was enrolled in ESL courses in school and enrolled in mainstream composition courses in college.
Students are expected to be fluent in English while they are in the university. If they are not fluent they are labeled basic, remedial, or not proficient. But, in reality these students can be very fluent in many languages and only need time and help to prove they can be fluent in English as well. In fact my friend and coworker was also multilingual; her first language was Tagalog, followed by English, Japanese, and French. By comparison, I have met white American students who only speak English. I have even been told by some of my students that their parents discourage a different language because being in America English is the language that should be spoken.

Being multilingual is who I am as a person and as a student. Speaking another language has shaped who I am as a student and writer. I say this because I have grown to be very self-conscious about the way I speak and write. This stems from an ESL instructor misunderstanding me because of my accent. I was born in California and was educated in the American school system—my parents briefly toyed with the idea of sending me to school in Mexico. I was born in the U.S. and should have had access to the American culture and language. But, my parents, being recent immigrants, were very sheltered and did not speak English themselves. Because of this, when I started school I only spoke Spanish. Year after year I was pulled out of class to sit with a small group of students who did not speak English; it was called ESL group. By the time I was in middle school I was no longer pulled out of class. However, in high school, I somehow was pulled back into the ESL group, though only for a short time. I was able to “test out” of taking ESL courses, but only after failing the “oral” exam. The lady who pulled me out of class asked me some questions as we were walking to her office:

*How are you?*

*Fine.*
Good. Can you tell me what we are doing right now?

Um, walking?

No, no. We are talking.

This was what I hope an extreme example of what can happen to a student who is labeled ESL. This lady, who had the power to make me continue ESL classes, seemed set on finding a mistake in my response. I could have answered that question in several ways. Yes, we were walking to her office, we were also talking, we were breathing, and we were multitasking. But, because I did not give the answer she wanted I was wrong. In that instant I was remedial; she held on to the misconception that because I spoke a different language, I must not have the right answers. While this of course did not happen in the writing classroom, that same attitude can be present in any classroom. If instructors have their minds set on finding something wrong with a student’s answer, or in the writing, instructors will find something wrong.

Unfortunately, this was not the last time I would have someone question my English speaking and writing abilities. I have a B.A. in print journalism and as an undergraduate student I wrote for the university newspaper. A professor who was an advisor to the students in the newspaper called me into his office and proceeded to engage me in small talk. It turned out this professor, who did not know me, as I was not in his class, was not interested in getting to know me at all. He was trying to determine my status as an ESL student. At that point my accent was completely gone and I thought I had not given him a reason to suspect I was ESL. He said there were some issues with my writing and he wanted to see—in the few minutes he spoke to me—if language was the problem. In his quick assessment he determined that my English was OK and that it seemed to him that the English language was not the problem for me. As it turned out, he was right,
language was not a problem for me as I went on to become a journalist for an English and Spanish language publication and an associate editor and columnist for another paper. But he didn’t know that I was capable of this at the time. He saw a problem and made an assumption about me. He assumed that my writing style and writing mistakes had to do with being a student who had trouble with language.

While these two experiences are not the only ones I’ve had as a direct result of being an ESL student, those are the ones that resonate the most because these two incidents are the reason I am always self-conscious about the way I write and the way I sound to others. I feel that there can be a right and wrong answer when it comes to speaking and writing. Because of these experiences, I often wondered if all my instructors thought the same way the advisor did. What this professor didn’t realize was that it was my writing identity as an ELL student that caused me to phrase things the way I did and to write in the style I did. While he saw this as something bad, a problem, another teacher might recognize that an ELL student might have outside influences in the way she writes. This is one of the more important things I write about in this thesis, that students like me have had experiences that shape how we enter the classroom.

I also want to point out that as an ESL and ELL student I bring to this research a unique perspective. I know what it is like to be an ESL student. I know what it is like for teachers to tell me they don’t understand my writing, and I know what it is like to not understand what exactly my teachers want in my writing. As I mention in chapter 4, ELL students want to be understood and they sometimes are not. I know what that is like. In addition to writing as an ELL student, I am also writing this thesis as a writing instructor. Every choice I made, every quote I used, and every student I spoke to were all a result of my identity. I wrote the way I did
and used the language I did because of my experiences as a multilingual Latina woman in my late 20s who also teaches English. That is the writing identity, in part, that I bring into this thesis. While this thesis is not about me, I do not use personal examples throughout my writing, I could not keep myself out of it, just as my students could not keep themselves out of their writing.

I am lucky to have the experiences I’ve had as an ESL and ELL student because I am able to look at ELL students and see that they may not always write what they meant to write, they may not understand what is being asked of them, and they may not have had access to the privileged discourse that the university values. In a sense, I am privileged to have this knowledge. I am not saying instructors who are not ESL or ELL cannot help or understand their ELL students. I am saying the exact opposite; they absolutely can help ELL students as long as they are willing to comprehend that ELL students don’t purposely write “bad” papers or aren’t lazy because they copied what another author wrote. It can be as simple as them not understanding what is being asked of them or that they just don’t have the knowledge, yet, to be successful writers.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter 2, I discuss writing as an act of identity and how different aspects of identity can shape what and how students write. My literature review focuses on the scholars who have written about writer identity. Many scholars ignore ELL students’ writing identity in respect to the different cultures that influence their writing; however, I found what was written about non-ELL students to be helpful. It gave me a lens to look at my own students’ writing and helped me understand that there are different aspects that contribute to who they become as writers. The main source I chose to draw from, Roz Ivanič, did her
research on identity of English speaking students. I think the same principles can be applied, but I do go on to point out how ELL students bring more complexity to the writing classroom because of their cultural and language backgrounds. I discuss Roz Ivanič’s aspects of identity, autobiographical self, discoursal self, and self as author in this chapter and use them to look at my own students’ writing in chapter 3. I write about how these three aspects of identity are always present in student writing and that for ELL students those experiences are different than those of their native-English speaking peers. Because of these differences, teachers can expect that the writing outcomes are also different, but not necessarily bad.

I also discuss agency, the active choices that students make in their writing. I write about how students try to position themselves inside the academy. The outcome may not always be what they wanted, but students do make choices in their writing that they hope identify them as university writers. While agency is an active choice students make in their writing, I also write that there are subconscious choices that students include in their writing. I argue that students be allowed to make their own choices in their writing, that they be allowed to write about their experiences, even if those experiences are not what the academy has deemed valuable. By allowing students to write about their experiences and allowing their experiences to shape their writing, students can start to make moves toward becoming better writers. On of my students, however, challenges and complicates my idea of this notion, which I discuss in chapter 5.

In chapter 3, my research chapter, I focus on three of my students. I analyze their writing using Ivanič’s aspects of identity as lenses to look at their work. I use examples of their work to show places where their cultural and other outside identities influence how they write. I also point out in this chapter with specific examples from my students’ writing where they are performing agency, where
they bring into their writing their autobiographical selves, what their discoursal selves are (through my analysis) and through our conversations, what they intended their self as author to be. By doing this research and analysis as a writing instructor, I am able to recognize that there are conflicting identities and conflicting discourses that these students are a part of, and I won’t be quick to dismiss a student’s point because of his or her background. By doing this, I am able to come up with possible solutions and ways of dealing with ELL students, which I discuss in a later chapter.

In chapter 4, I point out things that teachers should consider when attempting to understand ELL student writing. I use some examples from chapter 3, from my own students, as well as some examples from researchers that show what some of the consequences can be if ELL students are misunderstood or ignored. I make four key points in this chapter: 1) students are afraid to be and sound different; 2) ELL students struggle to be original thinkers; 3) ELL students want to be original thinkers and want to be understood, but not understanding them has it’s consequences; and, 4) There are things that teachers can do to help ELL student. This chapter brings together what I’ve said about my students and what others are saying about their students in regards to how we read their work.

While chapter 4 is mostly concerned with writing instructors attitudes about how we approach ELL students, chapter 5 discusses the ways we can help students inside the classroom. I reiterate the ways in which our ELL students differ from their native English-speaking peers. I also discuss how we can guide students to find their voice and suggest how to handle students who come into the classroom with strong cultural beliefs that may not always belong in the classroom. I also include a classroom activity that can help teachers get to know their students better culturally and linguistically.
CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS AN ELL STUDENT AND WHY DO THEY WRITE DIFFERENTLY?

For all students, ELL, or native English speakers, academic writing is an act of identity because students position themselves in their writing. To look at how and why they do this, many scholars have recently researched academic writing in both composition classrooms and writing across the curriculum programs. A lot of the research I found was done on English-speaking students in regards to their identities. Unfortunately, I found that often identity and ELL studies do not intersect, which is problematic because the make-up of the student body has shifted from a traditional white student body to a more diverse student body since more immigrants and children of immigrants are now enrolling in higher education. Since the personal, cultural and academic experiences of nonnative English speakers are different than those of native English speakers, the identities that show up in writing are different as well. It is important to look at the writing identity of ELL students specifically because these students attend the university at a disadvantage when it comes to academic identity; they do not possess what is traditionally considered accepted academic language. Because of this, writing instructors misunderstand or misinterpret ELL student writing, leaving students at a disadvantage in regards to becoming successful in the writing classroom.

My research and interests are concerned specifically with ELL students’ writing identity because I believe that since identity is socially constructed and since sometimes ELL students are misunderstood in their writing, they deserve extra attention in this matter. I believe that how and what students choose to write about stems from who they are culturally. Their experiences as English language learners will not only shape how they learn and what vocabularies they use in their
writing, those experiences also shape what they draw from to write about. This is because their discourses are different than those of students who grow up speaking only English. Because of her belief that identity is socially constructed, specifically culturally, I mainly draw from Roz Ivanič’s work on academic identity. Her interest is in identity of “mature” students who return to school after an absence and experience academic writing as an “identity crisis” (75). Ivanič covers several aspects of writing identity, none of which are specifically addressing ELL students. Even though Ivanič teaches in England and her book was not written for pedagogical purposes, I believe that her work is useful because thinking about identity in the way that she describes can be applied to ELL students since they too bring with them a diverse background that makes up their writing identity. Just as her students experienced an identity crisis in returning to school, ELL students also go through a similar crisis when they realize their writing experiences don’t align with the discourse of the academic community. ELL students also have conflicting identities, just like Roz Ivanič’s “mature” students. Some ELL students not only lack an understanding of the English language, but in some cases they also lack an understanding of the American culture—even those who grew up in the U.S. Because of this lack of knowledge, I would say that ELL students who are surrounded by and have absorbed the habits of more than one culture and language struggle with their writing and their identities more than students who grow up speaking only English and were surrounded only by the American culture.

Students are expected to be familiar with the English language and the American culture, particularly the academic culture. However, ELL students don’t always have some of the same advantages as their native English-speaking peers. Students absorb language while they are growing up and in a family that speaks
mostly Spanish, a student will learn word choice and order in that language. If
family members read only in Spanish, the student will possibly become a strong
reader in Spanish since that is the social and cultural context that the student is a
part of. Meena Singhal breaks down what this type of student might look like and
how they may not actually be familiar with academic language. She created a table
of some of the characteristics of Generation 1.5 students. This is part of that table:

For the most part, these students have read novels and fiction in high
school and [are] not familiar with a variety of academic texts. Some
have been misdiagnosed and prematurely mainstreamed or placed
into ESL classes, and some have been placed in remedial or low
track classes and therefore can be described as basic writers. Others
may have taken honors classes in high school but they have limited
[experience] in any academic vocabulary. They have received almost
no grammar instruction and are not familiar with parts of speech or
the language of grammar. (2)

Singhal is referring specifically to Generation 1.5 students, who, as I mentioned
earlier are similar to my students. While these students are educated in the U.S.,
they still may not fully grasp what academic writing looks like because of their
surroundings.

The people who surround students help shape their writing identity. Ivanič
believes that written language is affected by the social context of literacy, which
she describes as “the competing conventions, norms and practices of the culture,
institution(s) and society” (61). Writers draw on these norms to make decisions
about their writing. The main argument that she makes in her book is that,

…Particular discourse characteristics are shaped by the current
interests, values, beliefs and practices of particular social groups,
and so position the writers as participating in these interests, values, beliefs and practices. This means that, when a writer words something in a particular way, by a particular choice of words and structures, they are aligning themselves with others who use such words and structures, and hence making a statement of identity about themselves. (45)

This way of thinking about identity is that of social constructionists. Social constructionists believe identity is constructed by “like-minded peers” (Ivanič 12). To use Ivanič’s example of her students who experience an identity crisis when they return to school, that crisis “is not because of any inadequacy in themselves, but because of a mismatch between the social contexts which have constructed their identities in the past and the new social context which they are entering” (12). Students must then adjust to a new social identity when they enter the university.

While the type of student I focus on is American educated—and has access and the knowledge of what is expected of a higher learning institution—I believe that values and practices from home are strong enough to influence their attitudes about higher learning. Many ELL students, for example, value family over individualism, which is the common American way of thinking. Because of the value they place on family, these students have other priorities and responsibilities such as translating for parents on errands, taking care of siblings, working to help the family with an additional income, all while speaking their native language. I am not suggesting that Americans don’t value family. What I am saying is that it is common for American families to value education and the success of the individual, rather than communal success. For example, I recently taught in the Summer Bridge program at CSU, Fresno. One of my students, who came from a
very traditional Latino family, did not complete most of the work for the course. It turned out his father did not understand the importance of homework. As soon as this student finished his long day of math and English courses (from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. and some days 5 p.m.) he was expected to go to his job leaving him no time to complete his schoolwork. I believe the situation would have been different had this been a family that understood and valued education.

The student I mentioned above had a limited space from which to draw experiences to write about. Since there are times when the surrounding social influences can hinder how or what a student writes, this student was at a disadvantage. Since students draw on others to form their opinions and expertise in writing, they are participating in a learning community. This one particular student was not able to participate fully in that community because he was not given the opportunity to complete his schoolwork as a consequence of outside influences preventing it. And because learning is a social activity, which is what Patricia Bizzell calls knowledge, students can be left behind in such situations. This student did not learn from his peers, could not participate during group work and could not review the reading assignments because he did not do them. This student was left behind. Bizzell says that, “learning an academic discipline is like boarding a moving train” (144). I believe it is difficult for students to develop the academic self because of this “moving train” in the sense that my course moved on without this student because he was not able to jump on board.

Students must be given the opportunity to express who they are, that is, be able to write in the way they have learned to outside of the classroom. If, for example, a student who comes from a culture where they don’t typically question or disagree with an authority figure is now being asked to do so in their writing, they won’t know how to do that. They might know to argue their point in a
roundabout way in order to not sound abrasive or confrontational. Take for example, my student from Summer Bridge who was not able to disagree with his parents about his homework situation. If students are allowed to write in the style they understand, they will start to learn how to be academic writers, thus getting them the opportunity to board the “moving train.” The key is that we must not ask them to completely ignore who they are in their writing.

Having said that, should teachers only support students’ primary discourse? No. Supporting students’ discourses and allowing them agency can be hard to manage. Since I am focused on students who are U.S. educated, and since I said their primary discourse could have a greater influence over any other discourse—and I stand by this as I have explained in the example of my Summer Bridge student—I think that students can learn to include different discourses in their writing. It is up to writing instructors to push students to include different discourses. It is through assignments, class discussion, and freewrites that we can encourage students to realize that other discourse communities do exist, that they are members of communities other than their cultural communities, and by realizing this, they may start to include the knowledge that comes from those communities in their writing. We can encourage students to write about how these other communities have influenced who they are and how they affect their thinking. I believe by doing so students will start to use experiences and language that may be more appropriate for the academic community.

**Definitions Used to Analyze Identity**

While many students are influenced by those around them, social construction is just one of the ways to look at students’ writing identity. The identity of a writer has different aspects and I use Ivanič’s aspects of the term
writing identity to show that the term itself, and students, are indeed complicated and are worth studying to better understand the way ELL students write. Ivanič defines the three ways of looking at writing identity as autobiographical self, discoursal self, and self as author. Student writers bring with them unique experiences. Those experiences make up the autobiographical self. Autobiographical self is the identity “which people bring with them to any act of writing” (Ivanič 24). This identity, an identity I use to describe my students, deals with who students are, where they come from, and is constantly changing. It is not a static, “real-self” but changes with the student’s life history. The discoursal self is the impression that students convey in the text. These impressions can be done unconsciously or consciously and are multiple and can be contradictory (Ivanič 25). Ivanič calls this type of identity discoursal because “it is constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written” (25). For readers, this identity is more concerned with how the writer’s voice sounds, rather than the position the writer is taking. Self as author is how writers present themselves as authors. Unlike discoursal self, where the voice of the writer is based on how the reader hears it, this identity is concerned with the stand the writer takes, the writer’s position, the writer’s opinion and beliefs. Ivanič believes this is significant because of the authority the writer establishes in the text. She says some students have a strong authority presence while others have no presence at all and attribute everything to other authorities.

I focus on Ivanič’s definitions and aspects of writer identity because I found that those aspects are closely related to what I found in my own research. I found that my students were pulling from what they knew, and often those experiences came from more than one place or culture. Students draw from the practices they
are familiar with, and often times there are several cultures that students draw on (Ivanič). It is important for writing teachers to be aware that there are several spaces where students exist, or have existed in the past, because what they put on paper comes from those spaces. I believe all three aspects are present in student writing. I don’t believe that either of these aspects that make up identity can be ignored when looking at student writing because there is no getting around the fact that students bring who they are into their writing (autobiographical self). We as instructors hear our students’ voice in their text (discoursal self). The social context in which we read their text (the university writing classroom), how we read, how we grade and interpret what they wrote is also part of the discoursal self. And, finally, students’ intent in the paper is always present (self as author). Their intent, how they sound, is part of their identity because it is how they wanted to be represented in their writing. Whether those intentions, beliefs and opinions are clear, they do exist and cannot be ignored. As the face of the university changes—there are now many ELL, ESL, Generation 1.5, and international students in the American university—the way we look at student writing also needs to change. We are no longer only dealing with the English-only American student. We now have multicultural and multilingual students who bring with them different forms of writing. Since they are not the same students as their white, middle-class American counterparts, the multicultural multilingual students do not learn the same, therefore do not write the same—and it would be unfair to read their writing and respond to it in the same way.

Practicing Agency: Positioning Themselves Inside the Academy

Ivanič points to sociologist Erving Goffman who says that students have little or no control over the expression that they give. To an extent I believe this is
true because I agree that identity is socially constructed, that student writing is affected by those constructions and that students are often not aware of their changing identities. But at the same time, I also believe that students have agency. While students will never be able to ignore their autobiographical selves that shape who they are and how they write, students can be active in the decisions they make as writers. They may not, however, understand the importance or significance of their choices as writers. But, even if they do not understand, they may still practice agency nonetheless.

I believe that students are actively choosing what to include in a piece of writing. Since each ELL student brings to the classroom a different background, they have several more spaces to choose from in regards to what they put on paper than their native English-only speaking peers. These discourses from which they can choose do exist, even if they only play a minor role in the students’ lives, or even if students are not aware that they exist. As I mentioned above, I do believe that students have no control over what has shaped their identity in the past, but I can say they are capable of making conscious choices about their writing, even though they may not know or understand that they are making choices about identity. In the article “I am how I Sound” Roz Ivanič and David Camps point this out as well. They argue that students have “culturally available resources [that] offer the individual freedom and power over their self-representation” (7). Ivanič and Camps argue that students can choose what voices they want to include in their writing, thus giving them the power of agency. While all students have access to other social contexts, such as pop culture, ELL students do have other, often, stronger social influences shaping who they are. From personal experience I can say that the Latino culture places a lot of value on what the family says about any given topic. Many first generation students do not have the support from a
family that allows these students to appreciate the need to draw from other social contexts. While I think it is important to acknowledge that students have access to these other social contexts, I would argue that because of their cultural backgrounds there is not always a dominant academic context from which they could draw for their writing. Because these other, non-academic influences are present, allowing students to practice agency in the way they know and understand is important.

By allowing students to practice agency, we give them an opportunity to get creative in their writing. As I mentioned above, ELL students have unique experiences that they bring to the classroom. Students should be allowed to choose those experiences because “each individual act of self-representation is unique: The individual has a unique history of encounters with voices, and the freedom to select from the culturally available voice types and/or creatively recombine them in their own way” (Ivanič and Camps 7). In other words, they are subject to and active agents of their writing and from that writing creativity may arise. In a piece of academic writing students might choose to make an argument based on how their culture makes arguments. Say for example, a Buddhist student is asked to make an argument in a paper. This student, because of the surrounding idea of peace, may have a hard time forming an argument in a paper. The student may go about his argument in a roundabout way, and that should be OK. The student may be a first generation college student whose parents didn’t know to teach him that a direct argument is sometimes necessary in academic papers. To an instructor, that style of writing may not serve as an acceptable rhetorical choice; however, that would be unfair to the student who has not been exposed to other “acceptable” experiences. By allowing students to make choices, such as writing their papers in different styles, they are allowed to write freely, thus practicing agency.
Agency vs. Performance

Agency is not excluded from the many binaries that exist in the writing classroom. Just as there is a positive side to encouraging agency (creativity in the writing), there could be what some instructors might call a setback as well. Since some students are not familiar with how to write an academic paper, they sometimes mimic what they read. Scholars call this mimicking a parody and a performance of academic writing. I believe performance is a subset of agency. Students may not be actively making moves and choices in their writing, but in their performance they are going through the motions of academic writing, therefore I think setting the stage for agency.

David Bartholomae writes that agency does not always make for good academic writing because students sometimes practice agency in the way of performing. Performance is writing done by students who have not actually learned to become effective academic writers, or haven’t internalized how to become academic writers. Thus, they mimic, or act, as if they are. Bartholomae focuses on performance in his article “Inventing the University.” He writes, “The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define our discourse community” (134). By having to write as academics do, students must produce writing based on what they know.

Students must, as Bartholomae suggests, become an academic form of the self that students don’t yet possess because they are entering, as Ivanić says, a new social context. I believe that performance is a result of the pressure that students receive from the university that asks them, in a sense, to perform as students of an academy that they have not yet fully embraced. Because students are ELL, they don’t yet have the language to perform at the level the university expects. While
for some performance has a negative connotation, I believe it is our fault as
instructors that the negative connotation exists. We ask multilingual students to
master academic literacy and then punish them when they are unable to make
those academic moves in their writing. We should be clear to our student as to
what exactly we mean when we ask for academic writing. We need to tell them
that mastering academic English includes understanding literacy as:

not only…the ability to read and write, but as the ability to use
critical thinking or higher order thinking skills, communication
skills, and research skills. To be able to communicate in a range of
academic situations, it means advanced proficiency in the areas of
reading, writing, speaking, and listening. (Singhal 4)

Instead of expecting students to know how to do these things already, we should
have to teach these skills to them in our writing classes. We can also help by
embracing the experiences of our students because those experiences do shape
how they present themselves in our classrooms. By embracing these “other,”
“less” academic selves, instructors may get a feel for whom their students are and
why they make the choices they do in their writing, and those shared experiences
can possibly help shape how we teach them.

As I mentioned above, it is not the students’ fault that they don’t yet have
the ability to take on an academic voice. Like Bartholomae, Ivanič also suggests
that students are being asked to and attempting to write in a voice that they don’t
yet own. Ivanič writes, “Firstly, writers in academic contexts…have to position
themselves in relation to the highly valued convention in academic writing of
quoting from authoritative sources,” and, “Secondly, writers are sometimes
echoing the actual voices of people they have met and identify with, thereby
aligning themselves with those very people rather than with an abstract social
position” (48). Again, the point comes back to: identity is socially constructed. Students “sound” like others who they have met and read and that knowledge is what they bring to the page. It just so happens that students are not sure of how to sound like others without sounding like they are copying or performing.

Since the discoursal self is the impression that students give, in the case of some students it results in giving the impression of a performance. Because of this performance, students often use language that is not considered to be academic, which can become a problem for some instructors. Bizzell writes about students’ use of jargon and says that accomplished writers are expected to use academic vocabulary in moderation. The writing becomes jargon when the writing “seems over-elaborately academic in view of the argument’s apparent significance to the writer and the discipline” (Bizzell 136). Instead of a successful academic paper, the finished product that students sometimes turn in is what Bizzell calls a parody of the academic language. Ivanič also points to this in her book *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*. She notes that students are new to the social context of the academy and that a privileged discourse exists within the academy. Because students are trying to perform within that privileged discourse, students end up with a parody of jargon instead of the actual privileged discourse. Therefore the discoursal self, or the impression the students give, is one of parody instead of an impression of being an academic writer. But again, I think the problem is not the use of jargon, or the parody of language. The problem is that ELL students lack the knowledge and experience it takes to become effective academic writers. The pressure that the university puts on these students is the reason why they push so hard to sound academic. To alleviate this, instructors must be open-minded about the knowledge and experiences their ESL students bring into the classroom. We as instructors should
remind ourselves that some ELL students don’t have the same backgrounds as some native English speakers. Therefore, we must allow some freedom in the way we allow students to “speak” in their writing because they may not have been privileged enough to learn the language of the academy.

As I mentioned above, it is not entirely students fault that they fall into a performance, use jargon and end up writing a parody. After all, they are subject to and active agents of their social contexts. Ivanič and Camps demonstrate that “…Recognizing that identity is socially constructed exonerates individuals from full responsibility for the versions of self that they present in their writing: These versions of self are, as it were, part and parcel of the culture from which they are deriving them” (6). I go into more detail in my research chapter in regards to my students’ different cultures, which vary in their writing. That students’ cultures vary within one text is not unusual. Ivanič writes that a “variety of literacy practices may co-exist in one cultural setting,” and students draw from these practices (66). Ivanič also notes that people are positioned in a variety of dimensions simultaneously and that social practices are not universal but “differ from one social context to another” (65). Therefore, students adapt and write based on those various contexts.

**ELL Writing Identity**

Ivanič’s, Bizzell’s, and Bartholomae’s research was not done on ELL students. This section is about the writing identity of ELL students in the traditional sense of the term: they are still actively learning English. In this section I also include some research on students who did receive some of their education outside of the U.S. (international students). While that may seem irrelevant to my study because I focus on students who received the bulk of their education in the
U.S., I chose to include this research because of the cultural similarities. As I mentioned above ELL students—those with an American education—often come from a culture where they might not understand the American school system even though they were educated in it. Similarly, those students who are still acquiring English and have come from a different country also struggle with the American culture and language. I believe that including students’ stories who received some portion of their education outside of the U.S. provides a good look at how confusing it can be for ELL students to take part in the American education system.

At the risk of sounding idealistic, I think that if instructors were open to allowing some freedom in the vocabulary and different academic choices ELL students make, I believe there would be higher success rates because these students would not be immediately rejected on the basis of language choice alone. Rejection is one of the worst things we as instructors can do to students who are already struggling with their identities inside our classrooms.

Some students try to avoid being associated with being ELL students and with being in ESL courses because being ESL means they are not part of the mainstream academic discourse community. For Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, identity is about changing labels and perception. She argues that the definitions the academy uses for ESL students are problematic because of the stigmas attached. She also writes about the identity of ESL students and concludes that ESL students are not of singular identities, but of many complicated ones. She interviewed three students who were desperately trying to break free of being associated with the term ESL. I would argue that a student could never stop being ESL. Being ESL is part of the autobiographical self and students cannot change that about themselves because English will always be the second language they learned. I would agree
with Ortmeier-Hooper, however, when she says that there are negative connotations that come with the term. Those connotations are what need to change, not the experience of the students themselves. As scholars Terry Myers Zawacki and Anna Sophia Habib argue, teachers need to stop seeing these students as a problem and start seeing them as a resource. We can use our ESL and ELL students to teach us how to include material in our curriculum that they can relate to.

Zawacki, a professor and Writing Across the Curriculum director, and Habib, a professor and writing center director, wrote their article “Will Our Stories Help Teachers Understand?” in order to give voice to students who were struggling with their identities as writers because they were English Language Learners. Their article focuses on two things: 1) student voice and what it means to be an original thinker; and, 2) what it means to think critically in writing (55). They interviewed students and professors to get a better idea of how writing instructors could help ELL students.

The students they wrote about in their article, as well as my students, struggled to find their own voice in their writing. It can be very difficult for ELL students who are still learning the language to write in their own voice because most are learning to write in English through imitation, memorizing and copying (60). It seems that at times ELL students’ autobiographical selves prohibit them from writing the way they are expected to in the university. Some of the professors Zawacki and Habib interviewed were concerned that their students would not be able to write “‘independently’ and critically about the course material and express their ideas in their own words” (59). The students they interviewed also had the same concerns. One of their students said that learning was communal in India, where she grew up. She described the difficulty of critical thinking since in India
she said she was never taught to stop and ask why she agreed with a text, whereas here in the States, she is expected to think critically and ask “why” (61). She continued to say that “Your own expression was not really accepted, unlike [in the U.S.] where there’s a lot of emphasis on your thoughts and expression” (Zawacki and Habib 61). This student was never asked, at least in the writing classroom, to think critically about what she read and wrote. Other students in their home countries were asked to memorize and copy others’ work (61). These students can’t be expected to know what it means to have their own voice in their writing because they have not had academic experiences that teach them what having a voice means. It’s unrealistic to expect that these students establish an identity and an authority in their writing when they first enter a college composition course.

Instead of immediately finding an identity within the academic culture, students tend to feel excluded from conversations because they do not understand the culture; therefore they struggle to write about topics they are assigned. Sometimes, because of this, students feel they are leaving behind some of their knowledge and identity from their native language. In “Lost in the Puzzles” Jun Yang writes that she feels lost because her first language has faded away but she is not yet proficient enough in English (51). Not being able to further their vocabulary can affect the performance of ELL students in the classroom. Yang, who immigrated from China when she was a high school student and was a college junior at the time she wrote this essay about her personal experience as an ESL student, said she felt excluded from conversations because she didn’t have certain knowledge of the English language or American pop culture (52). She also felt “undefined” because of her lack of knowledge. Yang had an identity crisis because of her experiences in the writing classroom. Ironically, defining ELL students is often easy for instructors to do, though it is not always the right thing to
do. It can be easy for an instructor to dismiss problems in a student’s writing as ESL issues. But, as I mentioned before, a closer look at the writing and at the student may actually lead to a better understanding, a different perception and perhaps a better outcome for the ELL student. We should use Yang’s experience as an opportunity to think about the types of assignments we give our students and to make sure that all assignments be inclusionary of all students.

**Conclusion**

The same aspects of identity should not be applied universally to each student. Students do not create their writing identity in the same way because all students have different experiences that they bring with them into the classroom. Ivanič provides this explanation on how writing identity is determined: “A writer’s identity is not individual and new, but constituted by the discourses s/he adopts. On the other hand, a writer’s identity is determined not completely by other discourses, but rather by the unique way in which she draws on and combines them” (86). Students not only draw from different discourses, but how they draw from them is based on the individual.

Negative labels that are placed on ELL, multilingual, Generation 1.5, and ESL students continue to exist in the writing classroom. I often came across scholarship that labeled these students as remedial and/or basic writers, which they are not. What we as teachers need to do is be aware that ELL students bring more aspects of identity into the classroom than native English speaking students. My research chapter is a contribution to scholarship on multilingual students who are not ignored, but tucked away when it comes to understanding why they write the way they do. I hope to add to this conversation a deeper understanding of the multiple aspects of identities that students bring into the writing classroom.
CHAPTER 3: GETTING TO KNOW THREE ELL STUDENTS AND THEIR WRITING

In an effort to see if Roz Ivanič’s aspects of identity apply to some of my own ELL students, I spent a semester reviewing the writing of three of my students. I used Ivanič’s definition of identity, as well as the different aspects that make up writing identity (autobiographical self, discoursal self, and self as author), as a reading lens for my students’ writing. I looked to see how the autobiographical self (the unique experiences that students bring into the classroom) was present in their writing. Since I believe that the autobiographical self is always present in writing, it is not a matter of if, but how the autobiographical self is represented in writing. The discoursal self, the self that students convey to the reader, is something I had to interpret. Since this aspect of identity is reader based, I analyzed how my students “sounded” in their writing. In each section below I include their reactions and responses to my analyses and conclusions about their voices. Lastly, self as author (the voice students want to project in their writing) is also present in their writing. Each of the three students wanted to sound a certain way in their writing. I highlight in each section below how sometimes they didn’t sound the way they intended; their self as author and their discoursal selves were sometimes contradicting each other. Additionally, I provide suggestions for how to manage the situations with my students, though I save those suggestions for the next chapter.

Methodology

Since I was concerned with the writing identity of English Language Learners, I wanted to interview and read the work of ELL students. The students chose to take English 5A and 5B, the stretch course over one year, instead of
English 10, which is only one semester. I was a first-year Teaching Associate in the First Year Writing Program and I recruited three of my own students—Mary, Mo, and Sheng—from my English 5A course to help me with my research.

Initially, I asked the class for volunteers but nobody responded to my emails (see Appendix A for the email). I decided to get pushy and ask students if they were willing to help with my thesis. Once they understood the process I was able to sign on the three students and started the interviewing and data collecting process.

I officially and formally met with the students twice during the Fall 2011 semester. Those two meetings, each done individually, do not include occasional, informal conversations before class, after class or during my office hours, nor do they include any email exchanges. The first time I met with the students I got a sense of who they were culturally. This meeting took place within the first month of the semester. I asked where they were born, what language(s) they spoke before learning to speak English, if they were comfortable writing in English and if they were familiar with the term ESL. I asked them to identify themselves as writers and what it meant to be an ESL student. I also asked if they felt they were ignoring their own customs, culture or language when they wrote for an American classroom (see Appendix B for a complete list of questions). I found that they had little to say about this last question. During this initial meeting I also explained what I was doing, what I was doing it for, and I made clear to them that their involvement in no way affected their grade in my class. The three students also signed a consent form (see Appendix C for the consent form).

The second formal meeting with the students was during the Spring 2012 semester. At this point I had finished reading and analyzing their writing that

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1 ESL was the term I used at the time of my initial research before I focused on the term ELL.
included formal essays, freewrites, emails, BlackBoard discussion posts, replies to classmates about the BlackBoard posts, summaries, reflection letters, and every other piece of writing they did during the Fall 2011 semester. During this meeting I presented to the students my analysis and conclusions I made about their writing and about their identities as writers. The reason I ran my conclusions by the students was to check if they believed I was inaccurate in my assumptions about their identities as writers. In each section below I show that the students didn’t realize they were making choices as writers, or practicing agency, nor did they realize that their autobiographical selves shaped their writing.

All three students I spoke to were born in the United States and spoke a language other than English as their first language. They all learned English at a very young age. They were so young that they did not recollect learning the language, only that they learned it when they started school here in the United States.

All three of their names have been changed per their request.

Mary

Mary, at the time of the class was a 19-year-old freshman who grew up in Cutler, California. She is first generation American on her mother’s side and second generation on her father’s. Her dad, whose parents migrated from Mexico, was born in the United States and her mother migrated from Mexico. Both parents spoke mainly Spanish in the home when Mary was growing up, thus Spanish become Mary’s first language. Mary said she learned English as soon as she started attending school. She considers herself bilingual, though she admittedly doesn’t speak Spanish well anymore and sometimes mixes up her words in both languages when she speaks. She said she was raised to speak English right away.
This description of Mary constitutes her autobiographical self. She cannot change where she was born, her parents’ migration from another country, or that she didn’t speak English as her first language. Her autobiographical self is constructed for her because of her past experiences. Mary does, however, try to fight some of the negative preconceived notions that come with looking (dark skinned, dark hair and obvious Latina features) and writing as an ESL student.

Mary has had to work hard to prove that despite the way she looks, and despite the languages she speaks, she does belong in the university. Mary told me that when people assume she speaks Spanish it annoys her. This annoyance in part stems from the assumption that if she speaks Spanish, she won’t speak English well or at all. Mary knows that Spanish is not the primary language of an American university. During our first meeting when I asked her to identify herself as a writer she called herself a university student. Thus, her annoyance with people’s assumptions about her language is understandable because she has worked hard to prove to herself that she belongs in a university classroom. Mary distanced herself, though unintentionally, from her native language in order to identify herself as an English-speaking student. This is where her struggle with identity—her identity crisis—begins. Mary grew up understanding the importance of the English language because her parents taught her that she needed to speak English to become educated. She also says that people should be “native in their language,” meaning that people should be able to speak their native tongue as well as they do English. Mary, however, doesn’t do that well. This conflict that she has with herself is one that native English speakers do not experience. This

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2 According to the 2010 census, Cutler-population 5,000—had an estimated household income of $28,823 in 2009. For those 25 years and over only 20.7% have a high school diploma (City Data). I find it important to mention this in order to show that Mary comes from a fairly poor, uneducated area.
preoccupation with how to sound and speak in the writing classroom is unique to ELL students.

Mary surprised me in her writing because I expected her to be reserved and passive, just as she was in class during the first semester. During our first semester together she not once volunteered to speak or give an answer. The only time she did speak was when the class did small group work. Because of this lack of verbal communication, I was surprised at one of the first things I noticed in her writing: she was an aggressive writer. She took stands on issues and even challenged an entire institution in her writing; she did all of this without being aware of her rhetorical moves. This is an example of Mary’s discoursal self (how she sounded) and her self as author (how she intended to sound) in conflict with each other because she never meant to sound aggressive or confrontational.

In one assignment I asked the class to write about the difference between high school and college writing. Mary wrote,

Since elementary, middle and some part of my high school year we were taught to always do 5 paragraph essays format and templates to form a simple sentences. No if or buts about it in our districts it was all about it and always getting the point across toward the essay prompts that was assign on the exam such as CST and other exam.

Her writing that there were no “if or buts about it” shows me that she felt restrained by the institution. When I asked Mary if she was aware that she was practicing agency, she answered that when she didn’t like a topic, she only wrote three paragraphs (not meeting the requirements) and when she was passionate about something she wished she had more space to write (more than the allowed five paragraphs). She rebelled on paper because of the limits set upon her. Mary, without knowing, practiced agency by making her own choices about her writing.
In no way am I suggesting that rebelling equates to agency. What I am suggesting is that Mary was able to make a choice that was her own, and that is practicing agency.

In the same assignment Mary wrote about feeling restrained. “We had to think outside the box toward [a topic]. Writing should not have a limit for us. It was pretty difficult since we were used to making a five paragraph however 10 to 5 pages seems a piece of cakes after getting a prompt we all had an common.” By stating that “Writing should not have a limit for us” (emphasis mine), she challenges authority. She feels that she is being held back in her writing and questions the authority of the assignment. This is something that she is doing as a writer. She would never verbally challenge an assignment or question an instructor as to why she was limited to a certain number of paragraphs because coming from a traditional Latino family, children are taught to not question an authority figure. In the second sentence Mary was referring to a college writing prompt that required five to ten pages of writing. She noted that it would be easy since she was no longer limited by five paragraphs. This is another jab at authority. Instead of complaining how difficult it is to be restricted, Mary now claims that writing in college will be easy. This is one example of how she is conflicted as a student of writing. On one hand she challenges the limitations, but on the other, she dismisses the hard work she will have to put into a college writing assignment. As a result she established self as author by being forceful in her language. By establishing self as author, establishing her authority, she made a successful rhetorical move.

Mary also established self as author when she took a political stand and challenged an entire institution in the same assignment. She wrote, “The debate goes on till this day but I do believe our K-12 system can change it on teaching the
high school student to get to proper ways to write a college level or near a college level essay.” This student, who was not outspoken in the least, took on an entire institution in her writing. In this piece of writing she called for a major change in the way educational institutions teach writing. I asked her about this in our post analysis interview and she said that she does not consider herself to be political at all. She said that she never saw herself as someone who would challenge an institution the way she did in her writing. Mary used her writing to be outspoken, something she is not in everyday circumstances. Again, her discoursal self, how she sounded to her reader and self as author, how she meant to sound, not political and not confrontational, did not align.

Mary’s upbringing in a traditional Mexican home—where the dad was the head of the household and where women don’t typically have a voice—also influenced how she responded to reading. Our class did a unit on gender roles and the myth of equality. In response to a reading assignment Mary posted on Blackboard: “European men and American Men honored women yet don't give them the equal amount of rights as they do. What is this about?” By asking, “What is that about?” she is making a comment on a gender issue. She recognizes the inequality and is concerned about it. Mary has taken on the identity of a feminist, something she was not aware of. This is where her autobiographical self affected her writing.

She also wrote in response to whether there are roles that men and women are expected to participate in,

I agree even from personal for me as girl growing up, there was a specific guideline on my sex and culture since I'm hispanic. I overcame those obstacles because I didn't want to have children at a young ages nor did want to be someone house wife. I would to be
my own individual not be define by a man world. Even in the town I
grew up in has more pressure on growing up so fast and dressing up
as if they were 25 yet they are only 14 years old which is rather
ridiculous.

Her autobiographical self, in a very obvious way (her cultural description of
herself) showed up in her writing. She took a stand against the environment she
grew up in and used the university as a space to say that she does not belong in a
traditional Hispanic relationship where the women usually have children and
marry at a young age. The stand that she took could have only resulted because of
the experiences she went through as a young Latina woman.

Her autobiographical self was not just influenced by culture when she came
into the classroom. She also had a traditional American education to shape how
she wrote. As I mentioned above she came into my classroom with knowledge
about the five-paragraph essay. Along with what she knew about writing she also
came into the classroom with expectations about what she was expected to know
as a university student. When I interviewed her, without being prompted, she said
she knew she needed help with grammar and “stuff I’m supposed to know.” By
saying this, Mary acknowledges that she struggles with who she is as a writer—
not a very good one in her eyes—and the expectations of the university. She told
me that she was in Advanced Placement courses in high school and that because of
those courses she felt she needed to perform to a higher standard. This is what I
mentioned in the previous chapter: she felt she needed to perform in a language
that she did not yet possess.

Mary struggled with her identity in my class and at times seemed to take
this crisis pretty hard. The English 5A course required a final portfolio in which
students had to turn in a reflection essay about what they learned throughout the
semester. This assignment allowed them to reflect on their assignments and they were able to write about what worked for them and what didn’t. She wrote about the challenges of becoming a university student and how nervous she was to do so:

Coming into the university for the first didn’t really help all the jetties and nerves to it. Knowing the fact it is going to be a lot of load of work and stress level are going to rise but I did excepted a lot and I’m not disappointed to it. Well for the first essay assignment we had I turn in a really shitty essay ever in my lifetime. It was a struggle, yet an achieved in the long run since I joined the writing center.

Her constant shift from a person who challenged assignments in high school to a student who struggled in a university writing classroom took a toll on her attitude about herself. What stood out to me the most in this assignment was the way she felt about herself as a writer. Mary said that she submitted “a really shitty essay” at the beginning of the semester. Mary had never used foul language in her writing and she had never used it in our conversations in class. But, in the end Mary went from what she felt was a person who wrote “shitty” papers to a person who was able to understand what a university student is. Mary proved to have several identities that constantly changed depending on the assignment. Mary had to negotiate these identities with herself in order to figure out who she wanted to be as a university writer.

Mo

Mo’s biological father was born in Mexico and his mother is from El Salvador. His family, which includes a stepfather from El Salvador, now resides in Fresno. Spanish is the primary language spoken at home because his mom only
speaks Spanish. Mo, like Mary also learned English at a very young age. He doesn’t exactly remember his age, but he does remember a neighbor kid teaching him English around the time he started school in Fresno. At the time of my class he was an 18-year-old freshman, a class clown and the biggest challenge in my classroom, mainly because he constantly challenged my authority. I believe that the makeup of his autobiographical self is the reason for his behavior in my class. Mo also comes from a traditional Latino family where his dad, and currently his stepdad, is the head of the household. Mo very obviously carried into the classroom a very macho, patriarchal, attitude that I believe was constantly present in his writing.

Like Mary, Mo is well aware that the language of the institution is English. Mary struggles with keeping Spanish out of the picture so that she can embrace her academic self. Mo took a different approach. In one assignment—where students were to summarize an article—the very first words Mo wrote in his essay were in Spanish. It was a quote from his mom that translates to “hurry up, you will be late for school.” Often meaning is lost in translation; however, in this case, there isn’t much that can be misinterpreted or misunderstood in the translation. Yet, when I asked him in our interview why he used Spanish, his reason was that translating would change the meaning. He said his mom only speaks Spanish and that meaning would be lost if he translated what she said into English. I interpret this as him practicing agency. Mo is making sure that his autobiographical self is present in his writing. Had he written what his mom told him in English, his readers would not have been lost in the translation; however, what would have been lost was the awareness of the audience that his student comes from a home where Spanish is the primary language. Spanish is a part of who he is. He says that it doesn’t matter to him that the institution expects one thing, he won’t change
who he is. On the one hand I think it is great that he thinks this because I do feel that students’ voices should be present in their writing. But, on the other hand, students do have to be aware of the rules and mechanics of being successful academic writers, and at this point writing in multiple languages is not something that is considered acceptable in academic writing.

Despite his use of Spanish in his essay, Mo wanted to point out that he was making moves in his writing that good academic writers do. Mo’s self as author, how he wanted to sound in his writing, was something he was very particular about. In his final portfolio reflection letter Mo wrote, “Lastly these past few months has taught me to be a better planner. Having your thoughts organized and in chronological order will aid your writing to have a better flow.” Though it works for most writers, “organizing thoughts” is a very cliché thing to say about good writing. It was something that we talked about in class and it was something that I asked students to explain in detail. This was something that Mo had also mentioned in his midterm reflection letter. I asked him to explain what organization meant to him and he couldn’t. He admitted that he was only repeating what I said because he thought it was what I wanted to hear. He figured that if he could repeat what I said in class, it would be an academic success. He was trying to participate in the privileged discourse that I mentioned in the previous chapter.

In terms of a conflicting identity, I think Mo struggled the most out of the three students I interviewed because of his patriarchal Latino upbringing. On several occasions he interrupted me to point out his distaste in either my choices as an instructor, or in the class itself. On one occasion as the class was winding down a student commented on our activity of the day. I had done a “stop and respond” activity that I picked up from TA training. I read a short story and stopped several times during the story in order to have the students write a response to the story.
The activity forced them to make connections with other texts, make predictions, and some simply wrote about their likes and dislikes about the story and why. As students were packing up one student said that he liked what we did that day. Mo made a point to be heard across the room and over the rustling of papers and chairs to say, “I didn’t like it.” The room went quiet and all eyes were on me. I explained that the activities we have in the classroom aren’t designed so that students like them, but are designed so that students can learn from them, to which he responded, “I didn’t like it.” As I mentioned above, Mo comes from a traditional Latino family where the man is the provider and the woman is the caretaker. He acknowledges and accepts those roles for himself and for his family. For macho Latino men, a Latina woman has no place as an authority figure. Instead, they are valued as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. I constantly saw his identity as a macho Latino man conflict with his identity as a student. I believe the makeup of his autobiographical self, which he had no control over, caused him to struggle to view me as an authority figure in the writing classroom. When I went over this analysis with him he mentioned that his mom did hold a job (she contributed to the household) and that he felt that he respected me in class. I would argue that although his intentions might not have been to disrespect me, he still had no control over his autobiographical self. He grew up surrounded by the traditional Latino roles and as I mentioned before, students are not able to leave those out of the classroom.

One of the things that Latino parents engrain into their children is to never call their teachers, or any other respectable person, by their first name. Even though I gave my students the option to call me by my first name, none of them ever did. They saw it as a sign of respect to call me Ms. or Mrs. Martinez. Mo couldn’t bring himself to call me by my first name. When I asked him about this
Mo said he could never call any of his teachers by their first names because he was raised to never do that. By telling me this I gather that he has enough value and respect for his mother—who he said taught him that—to listen to her authority as a mother figure. Even though he didn’t call me by my first name, he constantly referred to authors he referenced in his writing by their first names even after I told the class, and commented on his paper, that standard format calls for the use of last names. After the course was over I emailed him about it for the purpose of analysis. He told me he didn’t really know why he had to use last names and that he didn’t even know he had to use authors’ last names. He wrote, “all the times i wrote about the authors was at a fast paste, trying to get the assignment over with. I don't see why referring to the authors by their last name is significant in writing.” He felt that since he never met the authors of articles he used he didn’t have a connection to them, therefore called them by their first names. Mo told me that he never purposely meant to challenge the institution or me. But in this email he still shows resistance to how things should be done in the classroom.

Even though Mo claimed he would not change who he is in his writing, I did see some changes to his identity. After some prying, he was finally honest with me about his role in my class. After telling me that I didn’t want to hear what he really had to say; and after I insisted that I did—I also had to remind him that at the moment I was not his instructor but a graduate student working on a thesis and that participation had absolutely no effect on his grade—he said that he had better things to do with his time than be in an English class. By insisting that I didn’t want to hear what he really felt, he was trying to protect the identity of the good student he had created for himself (his self as author). In fact, to me, his discoursal self, how he sounded as a writer, was actually that of a good student. A student like Mo who purposely sets out to please his instructors could have easily fooled
me into thinking he was internalizing the material—except that he didn’t revise his work and did repeat a lot of the same mistakes. He completed the work he was asked to do, he attempted to use language he assumed I wanted to hear and he claimed to learn “so much” from my class.

One of the instances that he claimed to learn from came after he undermined my authority in the classroom. After showing the class some examples of what was working well in their writing, Mo asked why I hadn’t used his paper as an example. He asked why his paper wasn’t “good enough” to use as an example. By phrasing the question the way he did—by asking why his wasn’t good enough—he saw my move as an instructor as negative commentary about his writing. I had not chosen his work because he did not do the assignment properly. The class was learning how to write a purposeful summary, which he did not do. He mostly copied what the author wrote and didn’t bother to change the language or use quotation marks or cite the author. Technically, what he did was plagiarism. I had already talked to the class about plagiarism and had to remind him that what he turned in was awfully close to plagiarism. In response he said he wanted to expand his vocabulary. Mo didn’t drop this issue. In his midterm reflection letter he wrote, “It is helpful to highlight important ideas or quotes in order to write a precise summary. However one thing you don’t want to do, is copy what you have highlighted. This will result in plagiarism, which is illegal.” He wrote this to make sure that I knew that he understood the issue of plagiarism. There was no need to point this out, as the reflection letter did not call for students to repeat what was in their syllabus. I saw this as a defensive move on his part because I had asked him to make sure he used his own words. He actually mentioned this issue again in the reflection letter. He wrote,
Annotation is another thing I believe I have developed. Before I would just use quotes without giving credit to the author. I have learned that it is important to use in text documentation. Not only that but also it is necessary to explain the quote that you have selected, in order for your reader to comprehend what that certain person is trying to convey.

Mo’s purpose here was to show me that he had learned his lesson.

Like Mary, Mo sometimes felt restricted by what he was able to write. In an author’s note for one of his projects Mo wrote, “The reason I chose to write about this topic was because I had a difficult time deciding on which topic to write about, especially since Mrs. Martinez wanted us to stick to the issues in Rereading America.” He felt his options were limited and restricting. In his note he blames me for the dilemma he was in about choosing a topic. Whereas Mary would challenge the institution for making her write about certain things, Mo took issue with me as an instructor who wouldn’t let him write about whatever he wanted.

Mo’s different aspects of identity were definitely present in his writing. I believe Mo struggled with who he wanted to be in my classroom. He wanted to be a good student who learned the value of a freshman English course—or at the very least he wanted me to think that’s who he was. He also wanted to be the class clown that would interrupt with a joke or a challenge. But mostly, Mo wanted to be himself: a student who just wanted to get his English course “over with.”

**Sheng**

At the time of my class Sheng was an 18-year-old first generation Hmong freshman from Fresno. Sheng’s parents migrated from Laos. His first language was Hmong and it is still the primary language spoken at home. When I asked him
during our interview if he remembered when he learned English he had no idea. He said he learned it at a very young age and was able to speak English in elementary school. Of the three students Sheng is whom I would consider the more “traditional” ELL student because of the dominant role language played in his home.

Sheng wanted to prove so badly that he belonged in the university; he wanted his self as author to be that of a competent university student. But, when he didn’t understand something he was quick to point out that he was new to the university community, which was the opposite of how he wanted to be seen. Early in the semester students were required to write two responses on Blackboard. These were two different assignments with two separate discussion boards in which to turn them in and two different due dates. I had showed the class how to access Blackboard and how to access the discussion boards where they would turn in their assignments. But technology was a problem for Sheng. In an email to me he wrote:

I was confused and unsure about the homework for the 8/30 and project1 response and actually wrote the 2 responses in the 8/30 response as one whole response. But I jus wrote a separate one to the response on the project1 prompt right now. I was wonder will u still mark it as late because I was really confused and accidentally did it together and I do not want a late on the project1 response because I was confuse. And I feel that it would be unfair because I would have done it separate did got full credit. And we are new at blackboard so can you put that into consideration and not mark it late please.

He was telling me that because he was new and unfamiliar with the workings of a university classroom that uses Blackboard, he should not be penalized for turning
in one of the assignments in the wrong place. He wanted to make sure he received full credit for both assignments. Although Sheng was set on proving himself to be a university student, he backtracked here and implied that he wasn’t quite there yet. To me, this showed that his autobiographical self, his lack of past experiences with technology and the academic culture, prevented him from presenting the self as author he wanted.

Throughout the semester Sheng worried about what kind of student he was becoming. We read an article that instructed students to be clear in their writing. He wrote a response about how he thought he comes across to readers—his discoursal self. Sheng wrote, “I tend to do this a lot. Thinking that my opinions and not being able to take a stand is making my readers unsure and not want to believe or agree to my writing. And I also feel unsure of my writing and choice of not taking a side, agreeing or disagreeing.” He wrote that he was unsure of his own writing. This shows that Sheng is very well aware that unclear writing leads to unhappy readers, which is not something he wants for himself. To me this proves that Sheng wants to be accepted as a university student but is afraid that others may not allow him into that community. This student is actually a perfect example of the different aspects of identity. Even though he didn’t know Roz Ivanič’s definitions of identity, he was actually articulating the definitions of the discoursal self, how he sounded to his readers, and self as author, how he wanted to sound.

Another thing I noticed in Sheng’s writing was an insistence that he understood the material when in actuality he struggled with it. Again, I think this was in an attempt to make sure he was part of the university community. He wanted to be a part of the privileged discourse. In a response to an article about gender roles Sheng wrote,
[Aaron] Devor’s article was the most helpful and understandable. His article gave me a clear view of what sex, gender, and roles were. I feel that I learned a lot about gender and sexes, just reading and trying to enter this conversation. I agree with Devor because it must have been hard for him as a child, to accept him as he was with society against him.

After reading this, I would think that any student was able to understand what the article was about. After all, Sheng does write that he has a “clear view” about what he read. But, here, in the same assignment, he says he didn’t actually get it. “I did not get how Devor was explaining the different roles and meaning that some people use the opposite traits from their roles but then they still are consider their own role not the other. Not sure if I am correctly wording this but I was confused on that little part towards the end.” This may have been a case of slight confusion on one small area of the article. However, when he wrote that he had a clear understanding of the article and that he learned a lot from it, I understood his discoursal identity to be just that: a clear understanding. His choice of words showed that he was taking on the identity, the self as author, of a university student who understood the material given to him. The second part of the assignment showed the conflicting identity that kept telling him that he wasn’t ready to be a part of the university because he actually didn’t understand the material in its entirety. When I asked him about this during our interview he said that he wanted to come across as a good student and that he wanted to get a good grade on his assignment. Like Mo, Sheng admitted to performing for his instructor.
Another thing Mo and Sheng had in common was the identity they had at home as far as the roles men played. In a response to an article the class read about gender roles he wrote,

As for my role, I am not so sure anymore but I think I would have to be in the average guy, boy, and men. I'm am not sure, but I like girls and do things any guy, boy, and men would. I grew up with my dad taking care of us kids and doing things like fixing things, carrying heavy stuff, doing a men's job. And my mother doing house chores, cooking, and taking care of the kids. This was my culture and background of life style I was grown in so I see the roles of a man and a women from my parents.

Even though he grew up in a home where the man was the provider, he never actively brought a patriarchal attitude into the classroom the way Mo did. In fact, this was the only time he mentioned his background and beliefs. He says that he is a “guy” meaning, he does manly things. But he questions that very identity when he writes “I am not so sure anymore.” The classroom has made him question his autobiographical self and his traditional Hmong background. Hmong culture is similar to Latino culture in the sense that women traditionally stay home and are often submissive to. Sheng’s father provides for his large family. Sheng has 12 siblings and Sheng thought becoming a provider was what he needed to do. But, it seems that for Sheng, becoming a university-educated student means that he might have to leave some of his traditions and culture behind.

Like Mo and Mary, Sheng in one instance questioned the high school institution. For our assignment about the difference between high school and college reading and writing he said that he never put much thought into reading in high school. Not only did he not put much thought, he also wrote that he was,
Not really analyzing the text I was given and just unsure of what I read. To just read and say I read the text already, and explain a little of what I read, let me slip a way from actually reading, understanding and gaining knowledge for the texts. Was it my fault or my teachers who never really took the time to actually make sure that I did my job and read the text. I would say it was my fault and the awful work ethic I put in to reading.

He wants to blame the institution for placing him in the situation where teachers, according to him, didn’t care enough about his success. But he recognized his own fault as a student; he recognized that his self as author needed to change. He wrote, “…but let me tell you a little secret there is a big difference with all the reading, writing, and thinking.” He goes on to write about the differences of high school and college reading and writing. Saying that it’s a secret shows that Sheng wasn’t aware of the differences himself. As if university success is a well-guarded secret exclusively available only to those who are a part of the university community, which I mentioned earlier, he felt he was not a part of yet.

Another similarity my three students had in common was writing to please high school teachers. Sheng wrote,

High school writing was formatted and was very basic. Five paragraph essay, twelve size font, double space, and times new roman. Easy and simple, support the thesis and show examples for every statements you wrote. And just make sure your essay makes sense and follow the structure your teacher told you to follow and you would of received credit and pass the class. With out any research or knowledge about what I was going to write about I just
wrote to fill my paper up and make it look like I knew what I was taking about and fool the teacher.

He wrote all this to say that he couldn’t get away with this in college. He is saying that in high school he only did what the teacher asked him to do, but he won’t be able to be a lazy student in the university. Sheng never had to do more than what was asked of him in a formatted essay. He is being honest about fooling a teacher in the past. By being honest about his habits before the university it shows a desire to change who he is as a writer.

All three students struggled with their new identity as university students in their own way. Mary was a quiet feminist who struggled with her native tongue. She sought validation for not speaking Spanish as well as she used to because English is what she had to focus on because it is the language the university values. Sheng, while already a university student, was desperately trying to establish himself as a university student. He wanted to make sure he was taking the appropriate steps to make sure he belonged. Mo struggled as a writer who constantly felt the need to challenge his assignments and me because of his patriarchal upbringing. And all three students had their autobiographical selves conflict with their self as authors and their discoursal selves.
CHAPTER 4: CRITICAL AWARENESS OF ELL WRITING HABITS

It is important to understand different aspects of writing identity in the writing classroom because understanding who students are can actually benefit both students and teachers. I believe that if instructors can understand at least who a student is culturally and socially, then we as instructors can better understand why students produce the writing they do. In return, students could potentially produce writing that is suitable for the writing classroom. I am not suggesting an intensive questionnaire, hair samples, and an interview process at the beginning of the semester. What I am suggesting is an open mind in regards to culture and language. Students who are English Language Learners should not be lumped together in a room and seen as solely first-year-writing students. They should be seen as individuals with different cultural and academic identities and not seen as less worthy of being in the classroom than their peers. Each of their experiences is different, unique even, and those experiences shape their identities as writers. It is important to look at identity because we need to understand how and why students produce the writing they do, if they can be original thinkers, or if they even understand or know how to produce for the writing classroom given their backgrounds. I believe that having this understanding and knowledge of students will help us avoid jumping to conclusions about them. If teachers make the effort to understand their students, I think teachers will be able to reshape their approach to ELL students. I go into more detail about what to do about this in the next chapter, but for now, there are things to consider when attempting understanding ELL students, which are listed below.

I am asking that teachers of writing take a deeper look at who their students are. A student’s culture can shape how and what she writes. In her study of three
English as a Second Language students Christina Ortmeier-Hooper complicated her own definition of identity and asks that others do the same. She learned that culture played a major role in what students wrote: “Often, [culture] is the unspoken element in the room, yet it dictates so much of how we ‘see’ a situation and ourselves” (Ortmeier-Hooper 409). Ortmeier-Hooper’s students, as were my own, were unaware of the influence that culture and personal experiences had in their writing. These personal experiences and culture shape an identity in the classroom that can’t be ignored or dismissed. As Roz Ivanič argues, writers cannot ignore who they are. A person’s autobiographical self is the identity they bring with them into their writing (24) even if they are not aware they are doing so. Therefore, we can’t blame students for the conclusions they draw or how they interpret a situation because their culture has helped shape their conclusions. In other words, their learning is not only coming from inside the classroom, but from outside experiences as well. Culture is just one element that makes learning a socially constructed experience.

All of the experiences that students have make up their identities. As I mentioned in chapter 3, it is up to writing instructors to be open-minded about their ELL students. While students do hold the responsibility to learn to become better writers, it is up to us as writing instructors, as the leaders of the writing classroom, to help guide them through the process. There are four things that need to be considered: 1) students are afraid to be and sound different; 2) ELL students struggle to be original thinkers; 3) ELL students want to be original thinkers and want to be understood, but not understanding them has its consequences; and, 4) There are things that teachers can do to help ELL students.
Being and Sounding Different

No matter what the situation, nobody wants to be the odd person out. The same applies to our students. They are afraid to show that they are different—culturally or linguistically. When I asked my students if anyone would be willing to participate in my research, nobody volunteered. Nobody wanted to step forward and admit that they were ESL or ELL students, or that they had been labeled as such at one point because of the negative presuppositions. My students were afraid of how their discoursal selves came across. One of Ortmeier-Hooper’s students was afraid of being “outed” as an ESL student for fear of being treated differently by her instructors. I believe that is also the reason my students didn’t want to identify themselves as such. The problem is that we have already lumped these students together into a category that treats them differently. Ortmeier-Hooper argues that terms like ESL, Generation 1.5, and ELL (English Language Learners) have become harmful to students. Students want to identify with being a part of the institution of higher learning but terms such as these can prevent others from accepting them into that institution. She studied three students who fit the term Generation 1.5, but whose experiences vary drastically. She argues that those students “begin to challenge our assumptions of Generation 1.5, or perhaps they challenge us to qualify our use of the term” (412). While Ortmeier-Hooper offers no new term or label for these students because she believes we should not “box” students into an ESL category, she does want instructors to be aware of the negative implications terms as ESL, Generation 1.5, and ELL have.

Instructors and students should value students’ autobiographical selves. Ortmeier-Hooper argues that there is value in cultural diversity in the classroom. Students who are labeled ELL are often thought to not be able to master academic discourse, but the students Ortmeier-Hooper studies proved otherwise. My
students prove otherwise. Ortmeier-Hooper writes, “…there are students out there who are eager to connect, to understand, and to write about their personal experiences with learning language and culture” (410). She says that those “writing tasks are ways for students…to write themselves into the classroom, to find their place among native-English peers” (410). By allowing and encouraging students to write about their experiences as ELL students, we are inviting them to participate in academic discourse, which is something that some students have yet to experience. Using their experiences can be a way for these students to write themselves into the university (Barthalomae) and we should encourage our students and make clear to them that that is what we want for them.

Original Thinkers

One of the reasons understanding identity is so important is because students struggle to be original thinkers, therefore dismissing their own presence in their writing. We could encourage students to use their autobiographical selves to write about the experiences that helped shape their knowledge about a subject. By doing this we can push students to form a strong discoursal self by using language they understand and can control within a text. Since they don’t know how to do this yet, ELL students tend to mimic what they read in their own writing. Because of this nonnative English speakers worry about plagiarism—which I will discuss later—in a way that native speakers don’t have to. When ELL students try to put an author’s work into their own words they struggle because they may not have the language to control the text. They face different challenges than native speakers in the sense that ELL students don’t have enough experience with the English language. As Barthalomae said, we are asking these students to speak the language of the university when they do not yet possess the knowledge
to do so (134). My student Sheng is a perfect example of this. He didn’t yet have the language or knowledge he needed to fully understand a text for our class. In his writing Sheng would dance around the idea of being a university student but would easily admit that he wasn’t yet an authority in his writing. Looking back at Roz Ivanič’s aspects of identity, self as author is important to understand because it relates to how exactly the student intended to sound in their writing. I believe that it is also related to the authority that students have in their writing. I think that having an authority, or a strong sense of self as author, in a piece of writing is important because while it is not the sole source of demonstrating an understanding of a subject, it does demonstrate a certain knowledge and commanding presence in a piece of writing. There are, however, those students who shy away from being present in their writing.

One of the ways that students commonly dismiss presence in their writing is by avoiding first-person writing. Ken Hyland wrote and researched writer pronouns in ESL writers. He conducted a study that looked at Hong Kong undergraduate students’ use of author pronouns: I, me, my, we, us, and our. While his study was done on International students, and the type of education these students have is not the same as the American educated students I studied, I believe the ideas and findings do apply because the findings align with what I found as well: because of cultural reasons, among other reasons, students are not comfortable using author pronouns. Hyland found that these students significantly avoided using them. It is important to understand that students may not feel comfortable using I in their papers. As teachers we tend to forget that students have been taught in high school to avoid using I. Hyland learned that his students found using I and we were inappropriate in academic writing, “having been taught not to bring their own opinions into their texts” (353). He also found that a cultural
reason was to blame for the lack of pronouns. He wrote that students felt “uncomfortable with the personal authority that the use of I implied” and that “First-person pronouns are a powerful way of projecting a strong writer identity, and this individualistic kind of stance seems to clash with beliefs and practices that value more collective forms of self-representation” (354). By avoiding the use of pronouns students fail to establish a strong identity in their writing. As a result, teachers expressed frustration with the lack of voice and presence from these students. My student Mary is a good example of this. She never came out and said, “I challenge the institution for teaching me the 5-paragraph essay,” she danced around it, trying to leave herself, or “I” out of it. In this case, it was important for me to understand what self as author is. I was able to ask her what she intended to say, or how she intended to sound in her writing. This didn’t come directly from the text, but from my comments and questions to her. We had a conversation about her self as author and as a result we were able to clear up how she wanted to sound in her writing. I was the one who had to draw conclusions from her writing and make an effort to ask Mary if what she wrote is actually what she meant.

The discoursal self and self as author in a piece of writing come down to how strong a presence students have in their writing. Hyland says, “by avoiding the use of author pronouns, and failing to stand behind their interpretations, these emerging writers run the risk of not establishing an effective authorial identity, and of failing to create a successful academic argument” (354). Hyland argues that there is no fixed set of rules that can be applied across all writing fields. He simply asks that students be taught not to avoid author pronouns and “that an explicit writer presence is often an effective rhetorical option” (355). He says we have a responsibility to make students aware of the impact an argument can have if they stand by it. ELL students may not have this information readily available to them.
My own students, for example, avoided pronouns in their writing. They mostly used you instead of I in their writing to make arguments. What they didn’t understand is that their arguments would have been more effective had their voices been present in the text. And what I didn’t understand as their teacher was that they did not have this knowledge when they came into my classroom. So, as teachers, we need to be aware of the cultural reasons that may be affecting our students’ learning and writing. We must also be aware of the voices that the students intend, or desired identities in their writing, even if they are not present in the writing itself. Instructors can tell students that they need to be heard in their writing, and in order to be heard, they need to be present in their writing.

It isn’t just a matter of telling students that they need to be heard. We must explain to them why it is important or significant that they be present in their writing. Fan Shen suggests that teachers should point out “the different cultural/ideological connotations of the word ‘I,’ the connotations that exist in a group-centered culture and an individual-centered one” (466). Some students may not be aware of the connotations that the word I carry. Or if they are, they avoid the use of I at all cost. Helping students understand that the use of I is acceptable in the English composition classroom can potentially lead to more active and present writing from ELL students.

Consequences of Not Being Original Thinkers

ELL students are often misunderstood. Whether it is because of their accents when they speak, because of their word choice or grammatical structures when they write, or because their discoursal self and self as author are two completely different things in their writing, they grow accustomed to misinterpretation. But, just because they know at some point that someone will
misunderstand them, ELL students don’t want to be misunderstood, especially not by their professors. As I mentioned in my research chapter, it would have been very easy for me to dismiss some of my students’ writing as “bad” and simply moved on to the next student in hopes of reading something worthy of the academy. Researchers Terry Myers Zawacki and Anna Sophia Habib also found that teachers didn’t really know how to help ELL students or just didn’t understand them. Originally, they wanted to “understand the influence of different languages and cultures on the academic writing they [international and immigrant students] produced” (55). But when they started interviewing these students, the students asked if the research would also help their teachers understand them better; hence the name of the article, Will our Stories Help Teachers Understand? The fact that they changed their focus of their research shows that they were attentive to the needs of their ESL and ELL students.

Zawacki and Habib interviewed faculty across the curriculum “to find out how aware they are of the academic identities their multilingual students are leaving behind and how sympathetic they are to these students’ efforts to reinvent themselves as writers in the U.S. academy” (55). They found that teachers often did not know how to help their multilingual ESL students. Faculty members said they weren’t sure how to help beyond pointing out error patterns or correcting their writing. Teachers also overlooked surface errors if they were able to understand what the students wrote. But one of the faculty’s main concerns was students’ ability to be independent thinkers (Zawacki and Habib 59). The faculty was concerned that because multilingual ESL and ELL students struggled with English, they might not be able to understand the material to pass the courses. Just by being aware of this dilemma is a small step toward understanding and helping ELL students.
I must disclose that there is a difference between the students Zawacki and Habib used in their case study and the ones I use in mine. While the students Zawacki and Habib used were in American universities at the time of the study, these students did immigrate to the U.S. later in life, too late to be considered Generation 1.5. These students are, however, still considered ESL, multilingual, and ELL—the very students I focused on in my own analysis. While the students do have a different educational background, Zawacki, Habib, and I believe that their stories can help composition instructors understand that students from different cultural backgrounds learn differently than students who are only surrounded by the American culture. Even though my students were raised in the U.S., they were strongly influenced by their parents’ Hmong, Mexican and Salvadorian cultures, as surely many students of immigrant parents are influenced as well. To Victor Villanueva, cultures and the memories and stories that accompany those cultures are extremely important because he says memories and identities are formed through generations (12). For Latinos and Latinas, their language “contains the assertion of the interconnectedness among identity, memory, and the personal” (Villanueva 16). This is part of the autobiographical self that students bring with them into the writing classroom: the memories of and from past generations that ELL students bring into the writing classroom.

Not taking the time to understand that ELL students sometimes learn differently can lead to serious problems for these students. Plagiarism is one such problem. Zawacki and Habib found that many students were taught to reproduce the writing of others. Students, in their native countries, were asked to “copy” what others have said and were not allowed to use their own ideas (64). Since these students were not allowed to form their own opinions it is no wonder some students flirt with plagiarism. They aren’t aware or sure of how they can
incorporate their own ideas into a paper, which is something that we value in the university. Zawacki and Habib argue that charges of plagiarism can be “particularly puzzling” for multilingual students because they are “well aware that teachers expect them to sound like the scholars in their disciplines and who may have learned to do that in their previous schooling experiences, by memorizing and copying others’ texts” (66). We ask that our students’ discoursal selves be aligned with those of scholars but then punish them when they do sound that way. For ELL students we must be cautious of our accusations because mimicking may be the only way they know how to write, even if they were taught in American schools. Because, as I mentioned earlier, cultural influences at home can be pulling them in one direction while the academy pulls them in another. In their eyes, they are doing nothing wrong because they may have been taught that sounding like and imitating scholars is the best way to write. That was the case with Mo, who copied what he read because he wanted his self as author to sound like an academic writer. Throughout the semester I had engrained in my students that they needed to sound like academics in their writing. What I read, his discoursal self, was not that of an academic writer, but that of someone who copied. Mo didn’t have the tools to paraphrase or make words his own because I had not given them to him yet.

While Roz Ivanič’s work on identity does not focus on ELL students, her views on students’ ability to be original thinkers can still be applied here. In her research she found that her students, like some of mine, were also on the verge of plagiarism. Her students would imitate the language of scholars they used in their writing, often without using quotation marks. She wrote: “In order to become a member of a community, to take on its discourse, it is necessary to try it out in some way, and it is extremely hard to draw the lines between plagiarism,
imitation, and acquisition of a new discourse” (195). Ivanič is saying that students have not yet acquired the language of academic discourse, and it is easy to fall into plagiarism because the students do not yet have their own academic voice. Some students do not yet have the ownership of academic discourse to use their own voice in their work so they imitate other voices.

One of the reasons that ELL students struggle with plagiarism and voice is because of the way they acquired the information that they bring into the classroom as part of their autobiographical selves. Villanueva would argue that it is the memory of his cultural identity that helps with the rhetoric of writing. For Villanueva, “While a good academic piece would help [him] to remember, rich narrative does more for the memory” (16). If we take Villanueva’s words to be true, the memory of a narrative from a family member—especially older family members whom are highly respected—will hold stronger in the memory of an ELL student than an academic piece read in the American or any school system. In a sense, that memory is what Ivanič would call acquiring a new discourse. In the case of an ELL student, the voice that comes through in the writing could be that of past generations and all the cultural, racial and linguistic implications that come with it.

As Ivanič suggests, ELL students are trying to write academically, they are just not quite able to. Plagiarism can be a way for students to write themselves into academic discourse. She writes: “Instead of viewing [plagiarism] as a crime prompting moral outrage one should, perhaps, view student writers’ practices of lifting phrases wholesale from their reading as one of the consequences of their desire to identify with the academic discourse community” (Ivanič 330). It is our job as instructors to be aware of when to accuse these students of plagiarism and when to pause and recognize that what they are doing is not plagiarizing, but
trying to write the same way an academic does despite their differences in how they learn. This is the reason Villanueva advocates to let memory into the writing classroom (19).

Even though some of the students Zawacki and Habib spoke to were educated outside of the U.S., they had the same cultural issues in writing as my students. Just like my students, who did not understand all the time what was being asked of them, Zawacki and Habib talked to students with the same problem. One student, for example, said that in Arabic complexity in writing was valued unlike the simple structure of the American classroom, which he found restricting (Zawacki and Habib 62). My own students for example, because of their culture, were also taught to go about arguments in a roundabout way. Though, this proved to not be a problem with Mary, other Latino and Hmong students could possibly struggle with the American style of straightforward writing and thinking. If a writing teacher isn’t aware of this students’ previous academic identity, the teacher may write this student off as not comprehending the material. Doing so can make students frustrated and confused because they do not understand what is being asked of them.

**How Instructors Can Help**

As a writing instructor I know how to be realistic. I know that it is difficult to run a successful course without adding to it the task of learning the cultural backgrounds of each of my students. As I mentioned above, it doesn’t have to be difficult. We have to be careful with how we ask our students to revise, and make sure we are clear when we ask them to do something. We should also not be quick to accuse students of plagiarism or not having a voice in their writing, because they don’t yet know what it means to have a voice and they don’t know how to
avoid plagiarism while trying to sound academic at the same time. Lastly, we can at least be aware that diversity exists in the classroom. Doing this can be as simple as looking up the demographics of the university: what language, besides English is the most common? What nationality makes up the student body?

One thing I have mentioned before is voice, the discoursal self, how students sound to readers. Students tend to think that they have to be absent in their writing, and as a result use a passive voice in their writing. We ask students to be present in their writing but then we criticize when that voice is not appropriate for academic writing. I have been guilty of this myself when I tell my students that their writing sounds too conversational or passive. Zawacki and Habib interviewed a student who was offended by such comments. She was expected to have a voice but was then told to be straightforward in her writing. She felt her “nice language” was being “wasted” (66). Rejecting ESL students’ voices can often lead students to feel that their own voices are inferior to the academic voices they are expected to use (67). In order to avoid this confusion, teachers should always be clear about expectations of the writing, including how we want students to sound. We as teachers can’t assume that ELL students know that we expect them to be present in their writing. In order to be clear with our students, teachers can require author’s notes for the work they turn in. Teachers can also have students write a summary of the prompt and guide students with questions such as: What is being asked of me? What should I do first?

Another thing instructors must be mindful of is their own cultural expectations and beliefs and how those beliefs and expectations may come across in the classroom. Fan Shen also believes it is important that teachers point out their own expectations. The first things Shen learned about English composition was that writing for the American classroom was a “social and cultural
experience” and that the number one rule in composition is “Be yourself” (460). Because of those things he learned, Shen would like teachers to explain what they mean when they tell their students to “just be yourself.” This is a matter of communication and always articulating to our students why we ask them to do what they are doing. As a student I have been in classroom where the instructor reminded us often of the hierarchy of the classroom; we were to do as we were told, no questions asked. I think that is the wrong way to go about assigning writing. We have to explain to our students the value of their voice and why their assignments are important. Language Studies Professor Jennifer Stacey says that we must not only be aware of changing identities in ELL students, but we must also be aware that the construction of a credible voice depends on the kind of writer identity that is expected. Stacey argues that teachers’ expectations about voice and self-representation in the text must be clear (354). She is referring to all disciplines within the university that require writing because different disciplines do in fact have different expectations as far as representation, author pronouns and voices.

The importance in making students aware of the shift in identities, as Shen explains it, is that in his case he was able to adapt to the identity he intends. When he writes in English instead of Chinese, Shen imagines himself “slipping into a new ‘skin’” (465). He has to change the way he writes and the way he thinks. Shen wrote that he accepts and values his new English writing identity. “Being conscious of these different identities has helped me to reconcile different systems of values and logic, and has played a pivotal role in my learning to compose English” (465). If understanding identity helped Shen in the writing classroom it can certainly help our students as well. I am not so naive to think that just because understanding identity helped one person become a better writer in the
composition classroom that it will help all students. I am simply asking that we help students understand their identity so that they too can become aware of the changes they are consciously or unconsciously experiencing as writers. Shen admits that had he been aware sooner that “the process of learning to write in English is in fact a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity” learning to write English composition would have been easier (466).

I believe understanding the changes in identity are important to the classroom not only for teachers, but for students as well. If teachers understand why students are producing the writing they do, they can perhaps help guide students to understand why they produce the writing they do. That understanding could potentially lead to better productivity from the students. Zawacki and Habib said that “…Our multilingual students have much to teach us about their ‘experienced curriculum,’ about our own teaching-with-writing practices, and about how our expectations for the ‘academic identities’ these students must assume fit into a wider global picture” (56-7). ELL students struggle immensely in the writing classroom because of the lack of experience and knowledge. Their cultural and academic backgrounds shape how they write and learn. But, the only way that teachers can learn from students is to be open-minded about them. Teachers must avoid jumping to conclusions about their multilingual students. By taking the time to understand students’ backgrounds teachers may be able to help students find their writing identities.
CHAPTER 5: PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO ELL STUDENTS

I’ve written a lot about how ELL students write and how instructors should be careful when approaching ELL student writing. Now that teachers have opened up their minds and changed their negative attitudes about ELL writers, what can we actually do in the classroom? I am not suggesting that all teachers need an attitude adjustment or that all teachers think negatively about ELL students. Those who have successfully discovered a way to find a balance between cultures, language, and learning acquisition should share their keys to success to those of us who have yet to find the balance. There are ways teachers can help inside of the writing classroom when ELL students present complications that we may not completely understand. In this last chapter I want to address the three major questions and problems I came across in regards to pedagogical practices: 1) How do we find a balance between ELL students’ personal cultures and the academic culture? 2) What is the best way to help ELL students find an academic voice? 3) What do we do when a student’s cultural views and behaviors are so strong, they disrupt the learning structure of the classroom?

Finding a Balance Between Cultures

Part of the problem with ELL students’ writing is that the academic culture wants to take over the outside cultures of these students. As a teacher I can’t allow that to happen to my own students. If that were allowed in every classroom we wouldn’t have Victor Villanueva’s *Memoria* or Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, or countless other bilingual works.

Eleanor Kutz claims that the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s resolution of Students’ Right to their
Own Language gives the impression that “everything goes” in academic discourse. The resolution called for students’ right to use their own dialects, “a variety of language used by some definable group” in the writing classroom (711). But, everything doesn’t go and Kutz, like myself, believes there is a middle ground.

As the CCCCs resolution suggests, students should be allowed to bring into the writing classroom their cultural and linguistic experiences. The concern seems to be that if students are given this right, will they come to master academic discourse (Kutz, 385)? It’s a valid concern and I do not endorse ignoring academic discourse. I understand that it is necessary to be successful in the university. But I would also argue, as Peter Elbow does, that “life is long and college is short” meaning that many students will not write academic discourse after they graduate (136). Should we teach them academic discourse? Yes. Is it the only discourse that will ultimately lead to academic success? No. Both Kutz and Elbow argue that while we should not ignore students’ right to their own language, we can teach more in addition to what they already know.

Where it gets tough for us, instructors of English, is knowing when and where to draw the line. Though it may irk some professors, I won’t circle in red ink if a students chooses to use the word ain’t, or to make other questionable word choice mistakes. This is where I side with the CCCCs resolution. I understand what the student intended to say. The word ain’t happens to be in that one particular student’s vocabulary instead of are not, and I choose to not pull my hair out about it. Nor do I choose to mark my students’ papers with red ink. Seeing a paper returned full of red ink can be discouraging for an ELL student. According to ESL professor John Truscott, students who are consistently corrected tend to shorten and simplify their writing in order to “avoid situations in which they might make errors.” Therefore, we don’t teach students anything by relentlessly pointing
out their mistakes. Truscott goes on to say that English language learners “who find a construction difficult tend to avoid it, using it only when especially confident that they can get it right, or when they have no choice” (268). It’s up to us to figure out patterns in ELL students’ writing and help them in that way.

We must also remember that many ELL students won’t write outside of the classroom. What we assign in our classrooms might not be enough to push students to become better writers. We can try to assign more writing, daily journals, reflections, blog entries, summaries, as much as we can without overloading them. But, what about bigger issues than word choice or grammar that comes with their culture? When it comes down to a problem of misunderstanding a student, then we need to step in and be more aggressive and present.

**Helping Find an Academic Voice**

I believe smaller issues such as word usage and grammar can come from their linguistic backgrounds. I also think that we as writing instructors have a deeper purpose than to point those mistakes out to students. We should work on ways to help ease our ELL students into academic discourse.

My student Mary was the one who made me realize that I might have expected too much of out of my freshman class, several of who were ELL. As instructors we must be clear about our expectations for our students. Mary wrote, “Our professor or some have this mind set; we should shuffle into college mode, [as] if we were robot[s] program[med] into this new world known as college.” Here Mary says that she isn’t a robot that has a college switch that can be turned on. She thinks that some professors expect too much of students who are making the transition from high school into the university. I obviously can’t speak for all teachers, but I would imagine we would all like to think that we don’t think of our
students as programmable robots. This is when understanding the discoursal self is helpful. I would say she sounds defensive and threatened by the attitudes of some of her professors. It can be hard to calm our students’ nerves when they first enter the university, but if we spend some time early in the course discussing and writing about the expectations we have for each other, it might help make not only ELL students, but also all students feel as if they belong in our classroom.

We can ask students to do some freewriting on some questions: What do you think you are expected to know at this point about writing? What do you think I expect you to learn by the end of the semester? Instructors can cover some of these ideas as part of the discussion: I (the instructor) know the class comes from a diverse background; I understand that you are not all at the same exact level of writing; and I don’t expect you to dive in and know everything there is to know about the writing process right away; and that by the end of the semester students will come to understand what it means to be a successful university writer. While unfortunately not all students are prepared for our composition courses, we will have to do our best to work with them. As Kutz suggests, start with students’ strengths and build from there (390). We need to help them realize through encouragement that they are not problem writers and that they do have something of value in their writing.

Writing instructors must also keep in mind that some ELL students need help finding their voice because they might not have access to academic discourse outside of school. Some ELL students can be hard on themselves because they don’t have the knowledge or support from home to become strong academic writers. Linda Fernsten writes, “Having access to certain discourses enables one to change negative writer identity” (52). She means students who say: I’m a bad writer, I can’t write, I’m a basic writer. These are things I hear, though not
exclusively from ELL students. Instructors can help students find a voice in their writing so that students can stop seeing themselves as problem writers. We need to help them realize that being ELL or a multilingual student is not a bad thing. “Too often ESL speakers and writers accept the judgments of teachers as truth, unaware of the social and political realities that reinforce the labeling” (Fernsten 44). This is unfortunate but it does happen when ELL students are seen as synonymous with basic or remedial writers. Because our students accept our words as truth, we need to tell them that they are not remedial, they are not basic, and that being ESL, ELL, or multilingual can be a good thing.

As I mentioned above, we need to be better at making ourselves clear to our ELL students. We need to explain our expectations and in return we can request that our students be open about their work and their understanding of our writing assignments. We as writing instructors can request author’s notes so that we know what our students are trying to say in their writing. Some of the criteria for a good authors note includes: the main argument of the paper; students must explain what they think they are doing well because in doing so we know what their intentions are; they must explain what they think needs work. This will not only help us help them in our response, but it gives us an idea of who they are as writers, which is a good thing because we can then help them acquire the new discourse.

As teachers we must also recognize our own cultural factors that we bring into the classroom. We need to ask ourselves where our attitudes about writing come from; same goes for our attitude about race, language and culture in the writing classroom.
**Drawing a Line, When Too Much Is Enough**

In some instances the culture of a student can be so strong that it is dominantly present in the classroom. In my case Mo brought with him into the classroom strong patriarchal views. Because of my research I was able to determine that the values he held as a traditional Latino male shaped how he saw me in the classroom. I am in no way defending his attitude, but I can say that I understand.

Not every Latino student is going to come into the writing classroom with a macho, patriarchal attitude. Instructors already know this. And I cannot and will not claim that a single solution will work for all students who are problematic. But, what I will say is that Mo complicated my way of thinking about agency and voice in the writing classroom. I am a firm believer in allowing students to write based on their own personal and cultural experiences. Those experiences, as I’ve previously mentioned work their way into their writing whether students are aware of those experiences or not. However, when a student comes into our classroom with a negative attitude that interrupts the learning dynamic, instructors have to draw a line. In some cases certain attitudes and beliefs are not compatible with the writing classroom.

So far I have argued that it is not OK to shut down or out someone who brings their culture into the classroom. But I am saying that there has to be a line that cannot be crossed. Several of my female colleagues of color have expressed concern about their authority specifically in regards to white male students. While Mo was not a white student I found that his behavior was very much like that of students in Chavella Pittman’s article “Race and Gender Oppression in the Classroom: The Experiences of Women Faculty of Color with White Male Students.” While female teachers Pittman interviewed for this article did say that it
was mostly white male students who gave them grief, they did say that there were times, though rarely, when students of color challenged them as well. It is for that reason I chose to include this article in my research.

The female professors in Pittman’s study said that students challenged their authority in various ways. Some white male students entered their office without knocking, sat in their class with their arms crossed and some instructors picked up a negative tone in emails. Mo brought with him an air of challenging authority as well. He often times behaved disrespectfully in class.

The women in Pittman’s article “perceived that their race and gender identities engendered patterns of disregard and disrespect in their classrooms” (192). While this can happen with any race, gender, ELL or not, one thing we do have to be aware of as instructors is that students will have different cultural backgrounds who may think it is OK to challenge the authority of a female, Black, Latina, or Asian professor. I am aware that white male professors are excluded in this one example of student behavior, but I offer this as only a theory as to why a student with strong cultural ties may behave the way they do in a classroom.

I have to admit that I am not happy with the way I dealt with Mo. I began to ignore his comments in class and I felt as if I had to push through the semester with this student. What I should have seen, and what I hope other instructors see, is an opportunity to learn from a student like this. I felt unfairly challenged, attacked and tested because of Mo. Professor Joan V. Gallos believes that caring is essential to good teaching but admits that doing so can be difficult when teachers feel they are being unfairly challenged (67). Gallos did a case study on one male student who challenged his female professor. Gallos points out that while this one particular case deals with a female instructor, male educators can find this information useful as well (71).
While some instructors might take a challenging student and turn it into a situation where the teacher establishes authority—and in some cases that might be what is necessary—or takes the situation personally, Gallos writes:

"It is safer to rely on power than caring, especially in a society where power has traditionally been rewarded and caring demeaned. How can instructors and trainers reframe classroom events like this as an opportunity for important learning rather than a personal attack or a situation requiring distance, domination, or defeat?...How can they muster care and concern for someone for whom, at the moment, they have such anger and primitive dislike? (67)"

These are the same questions I asked myself about Mo. How could I have made his situation a teaching moment?

The first things Gallos suggests are to not take students’ behavior personally and that teachers should care about their students and not dismiss them or their outbursts. There are a few teaching strategies that Gallos suggests. One is to reflect with the student: “what do you hear me saying?” (70). This is something I could have asked Mo when he yelled out that he did not like the activity we did in class. I should have asked him what he thought I was trying to teach the class. Asked him to summarize what he heard and learned from the lesson. “What brings you to that conclusion?” or “how would you feel if someone said that to you?” (72). Granted, Gallos does not offer a solution if a student simply replies, “I don’t care.” At that point I would feel like distancing myself from such a student, but that would not be helpful to a student like Mo. I would need to make him stop and listen and reflect on his behavior in order for the conversation and situation to be productive.
Gallos included a table of nonproductive versus productive instructor strategies. Among them she wrote that instructors should appreciate others’ struggles instead of labeling others as a problem; we should inquire instead of tell; engage instead of distance; and, empathize instead of blame (71). Most of these things I failed to do as a teacher. This is what I ask of educators, to not label ELL students as a problem because they have different cultural backgrounds, but accept and learn from those struggles instead. I understand that it may be difficult because, “It is easy for the instructor or trainer to interpret such remarks as a personal attack. A natural instinct when attacked is to defend or flee, neither of which takes good advantage of the present teaching-learning opportunity”(74). But we can’t flee. It is part of our duty to meet the students and accept they come from various backgrounds and work from there.

The last thing I want to suggest about Mo and students like him is that instructors should not engage in a confrontation. I had the sense that he felt he wanted to prove me wrong about my decisions as a teacher. As a Latina woman in a large traditional Mexican family I have experience in this area, and I never win. So, I can’t see this situation as something I can win or lose. That is a mistake. For me, I just accepted Mo’s behavior as what it was, which I realize now was something I should not have ignored.

For students who have strong beliefs it would be a good idea to have the student lay those ideas out. The rest of the class can challenge those ideas in a respectful way, or the instructors can give their thoughts as well. This can be done when a student blurts something out in class. It has to be done in a way that is investigative not confrontational. By doing this, students can at least think about why they feel so strongly about something instead of just telling you that they do. It is important that students know and understand why they feel they way they do
and why they have the beliefs they do. This would have been good to do when Mo yelled out to the class that he didn’t like the activity we did. I could have asked the class to reflect on the activity and share with the class what they learned and what value they could find in the activity.

While these are only mere suggestions as to what I could have and should have done with a student that pushed so hard against my authority, I am nowhere near solving this issue. It is in cases such as these that I would ask that teachers share their ideas, do some research about how to handle a student who clearly has a problem with the authority of a writing instructor. As I mentioned before, Mo challenged my views on agency, voice, and culture in the classroom. It made me understand that by allowing different cultures to be present in my classroom, I opened up my classroom to an entire new set of issues that I did now know how to handle. Do we simply give up and close off those other cultures? No. We learn to deal with them. We come together as teachers of writing and figure out how to teach to someone who has strong cultural ties.

**A Few Other Suggestions**

ELL students struggle with their own identities and teachers should not put them in situations where they can confuse the students further. We can’t ask students to identify themselves as different. As I discussed in the previous chapter, they don’t want to be different. I have designed a classroom activity (Appendix D) that is meant to give instructors a way to get to know their students culturally. First, the instructor has to set the tone for this activity. For instructors who are familiar with and come from several different cultural backgrounds, they can tell their students how those backgrounds have helped shape their identity in the classroom as a student and now as a professor. For those who don’t come from a
different background, they can still tell their class how much they value culture. All teachers must emphasize the value of different cultural backgrounds and tell their students that coming from a different background doesn’t hinder their learning. I think that if we emphasize that being different can be good for the writing classroom, students may not be so reluctant to identify themselves as such.

In the classroom activity I provide I also ask students to write if they are familiar with how the American university uses sources and if they are familiar with how other cultures use sources. I do this to start a conversation about plagiarism, since it is one of the recurring problems with ELL students. While I introduce this in this activity, it will have to be something that instructors continue to discuss in the class beyond the first day. Introducing plagiarism through this activity will go beyond what I have told my students and what most university teachers have told me about it: that it’s bad and can get me kicked out of school. Kathyrn Valentine wrote about plagiarism as a literacy practice and how it is connected to an ethical discourse. She uses an example of one International student who failed to properly cite his sources. Valentine writes about the importance of understanding the contexts that surround plagiarism: “Given that plagiarism involves social relationships, attitudes, and values as much as it involves texts and rules of citation, I think that we can better recognize the work that our students present to us if we also recognize that this work involves negotiating social relationships, attitudes, and values” (90). It is important for all teachers to understand Valentine’s argument because students are situated within different social relationships. ELL students’ attitudes and understanding of plagiarism—specifically in regards to those who might be have had an education outside of the U.S—might not be the same as what the American university’s understanding of it is.
I think what Valentine says about what teachers should do to teach students about plagiarism goes perfect with my classroom activity. Though, as I said, I am only introducing plagiarism with this activity, I believe that introduction sets the framework for a deeper and possibly easier conversation about plagiarism later. Valentine wrote that students:

…Need to be taught the significance of citation for their identity as honest students (if they are going to avoid plagiarism) and how to read the context (which defines when it is necessary to cite and what will count as citation) in which they are working. This means that discussions about plagiarism with students need to start with discussions of what is at stake for their reputations—even if they have always been honest—that involves participants’ values, attitudes, and feelings as well as their social relationships to each other and to the institutions in which they work. What we count as plagiarism depends on the context in which we are working. (105)

This is something I should have done with my students who plagiarized. Instead, I lectured about how important it was to cite because they could get in serious trouble. They were not in trouble with me, but I said they could. Valentine’s approach is much more beneficial as it explains why it is important to know how to cite and why it is important to not take someone else’s words without using the proper citation.

My classroom activity is designed to be used on the first day of class, or as early as possible in the semester. It is a way for students to communicate with the instructor who they are as writers, even if they had never thought of themselves as writers. At the end of the activity I ask that students write about how their cultural and language backgrounds have helped shape their writing. While there is nothing
a teacher can do at this point to respond to her students, teachers can take note of which students seem to have an ELL background. I think it is a safe way of learning about students without “outing” them as ELL students. We as teachers should value cultural and language differences and we should continue to emphasize this. Doing this activity is just one step toward understanding student identity and helping ELL students become successful writers.

Teachers and students alike can learn not only from this activity, but also from the writing students produce throughout the course. I believe teachers will get to know their students and be able to assess when would be a good time to ignore a sticky situation, when to push for students to continue what they are doing and/or when to make them stop and think about what it is they are doing or saying. Learning to recognize what each student needs can and will be a difficult task. But, through research and patience I believe writing instructors can find tools to help them understand their ELL students better.
WORKS CITED
WORKS CITED

Adler-Kassner, Linda “Just Writing, Basically: Basic Writers on Basic Writing.” 


Hello everyone,

As I mentioned in class on Thursday I am working on some research about writing identity in those students who speak or spoke another language other than English. You don't necessarily have to identify yourself as an English as a Second Language student. I am looking for students who maybe grew up speaking another language besides English.

Spanish was my first language but I learned English at a very young age. I think that learning Spanish first changed the way I learned how to write. You don't have to be aware of this learning process yourself, just leave those findings up to me.

All I am asking of you is to collect your writing. I will have a few interview questions for you to answer toward the end of the semester. Those won't take up too much of your time.

So all you guys would have to do is sign a permission form that I will have sometime next week, let me use the writing you have done for this class, and answer some interview questions. I am going to collect your writing so I can read through it to see if I can find anything related to identity.

This project is my own thesis work and is no way related to your success in English 5A. So if you choose to participate do not expect any special treatment or compensation in class. Same goes if you choose not to participate, there will be no hard feelings.

You guys can email me back or let me know after class if you are interested in helping.

Thanks in advance for your help.
APPENDIX B: LIST OF QUESTIONS
• Where were you born and where did you grow up?
• What language did you learn to speak first?
• Did you at one point read and write in that language?
• What do your parents do for a living?
• How do you identify yourself in terms of the languages you speak and write? (I am looking for multilingual, bilingual, ESL, etc.)
• I’d like to learn more about what you think it means to be… (answer to above identity question).
• What comes to mind when you think of being…(answer to above identity question)?
• Do you feel you are ignoring your own customs, culture or language when you have to write for an American classroom?
• Are you becoming “mute” in two languages? Why or How?
• Do you feel like yourself when you write in English? Explain.
• How is it different writing in English than it was writing in the language you are most comfortable with?
• Do you struggle with being an original thinker because of a language barrier?
• How does who you are effect how you write?
• Were you aware that your culture affects how you write?
APPENDIX C: STUDENT CONSENT FORM FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
**Purpose of the Research:** My research interest is on identity in English as Second Language students and how it is related to writing. I would like to collect writing from this English 5A in an attempt to make any possible connections between identity and writing that is produced in this class. The information collected will be used to inform writing teachers of the complexities of being a second language learner and how it affects their identities as writers.

**Procedures:** I would like to collect all writing that you turn in to me, post on blackboard, or send to me via email. Participation in this project is voluntary. Your grade will not be affected by your decision to participate.

**Confidentiality:** All information will remain confidential based on how each participant fills out the consent form below. The only person who will have access to the research material will be me. This material may be published in my thesis, may be presented at academic conferences, and could also be published into a short article or full-length book for the field of Composition and Rhetoric.

**Compensation:** There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** As a participant in this research project, you can, at any time, ask questions about how your information is being used.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** Individual participation is completely voluntary, and any person is free to withdraw consent from the research at any time without adverse affects.
Consent, Right to Received a Copy:

This form requests your consent to allow Martha Martinez to use the material handed in to me, posted on blackboard, or emailed to me in the context of this English 5A course. The material collected from these sites in this class could be used in conference presentations, or publication as an article, thesis, or book. Filling out this consent form will not affect your grade. You will be given a copy of this consent form. Please fill out the following if you give consent:

_____ I am willing to have materials handed in, posted on Blackboard, or emailed for English 5A collected and included in conference presentations, article length publications, a thesis, or a book.

Please check one of the following:

_____ I wish to have my name remain on my writing.
_____ I wish to have a pseudonym (fill in or leave blank):
____________________

Please specify any restrictions on the use of your writing:
________________________________________
________________________________________

Your Name: (Please print): ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

Phone Number: ______________________

Email Address: _________________________

Home Address: ________________________________________

By signing below you give your permission for the material you hand in, post on Blackboard, or email to be used with the restrictions and for the purposes indicated above. You understand that your anonymity will be maintained unless you designate otherwise. You understand that you are free to withdraw consent at any
time, now or in the future. You understand that filling out this form will not affect your grade.

Signature: _________________________________

If you have questions or concerns, please contact Martha Martinez at mmartinez9@mail.fresnostate.edu or my Thesis Chair Dr. Virginia (Ginny) Crisco at (559)278-4918 or vcrisco@csufresno.edu.
APPENDIX D: GETTING TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND YOUR STUDENTS’ CLASSROOM ACTIVITY
Rationale: The first day of class is designed to introduce the students to the instructor and each other, and of course give the students an introduction to the course. In my experience as a teacher and student the questions designed to pry out information of shy students are always the same: Give us your name and major. Instead of that, or in addition to it, I think it would be beneficial for the first day introductions to include more background on the students. As I have argued, understanding student background can be beneficial to both the instructor and the students. Doing this as a fun first day activity will hopefully get students to open up about who they are culturally. If this is done further in the semester I think these questions may sound like an interrogation. Doing this activity on the first day of class this should avoid any of the negative connotations that come with students identifying themselves as ESL or from different cultures.

Goals: Students will get to know each other. Instructor will know which students come from different backgrounds, what languages they speak or whether they are ESL. Students will realize that their experiences matter.

Procedure (3 mins): Have the students write this down:
I’ve had experiences that have helped shape who I am.

Tell them:
“Your experiences are your own. Embrace those experiences, use them to help you get through this class. And remember when you write about those experiences remember to always use the first person. Your readers didn’t have those experiences so don’t write ‘when you go through something like this…’ It was you, the individual who experienced what you have.”

(10 mins) Have students write the answers to the following questions:
What languages were you familiar with growing up?
What languages are you familiar with now?
How did your family background influence your decision to attend the university?

Did your parents or other siblings attend college?

Are you familiar with how the American university uses sources? Are you familiar with how other cultures use sources?

(15mins) Have students get into small groups of no more than 4 people and share their answers. Doing this will help shy students see that others have different language and cultural experiences as well. Have students make a list of languages they speak within their group as well as what cultural background they come from. Include in that list how many are first generation college students.

(15 mins) Come back as a class and share their answers and lists with the class. Instructor should have this on the board ready to be filled in with student answers:

Languages  First generation college students (tally)  cultures

Writing these answers on the board serves as having a visual for the students. I like that they will be able to see the different places they all come from as well as the different languages they speak.

Instructor can also participate sharing her/his cultural experiences

Follow up:

Instructors can choose to turn this into a short writing assignment. Students tend to say more in their writing than they do out loud early in the semester.

1-2 page paper

Elaborate on the questions from class and also answer these questions:

How has your cultural background influenced the way you write? (Students may not have thought about this before but it will get them to think about it now)
If you have ever written in a language other than English, how has that affected your writing for this classroom?

If you have never written in any other language, do you feel you are at an advantage? Explain.
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Martha Martinez

Type full name as it appears on submission

April 2, 2012

Date