I am who I write

Writing gives us the opportunity to speak our mind identifying ourselves as individuals. Whether you are writing a research paper or a blog entry, having the ability to voice your own opinion is what makes it your own. As for L2 writers this may come as an obstacle during the time they are learning how to write. From the beginning L2 learners are often taught how they should compose their writing yet teachers may avoid emphasizing on the importance of how the tone (Harmer 2004) of their writing should come off to the target reader. In this research paper I will examine how future teachers can promote self representation, authorial identity in L2 writing, and how blogs can tie the writer to their cultural identity.

According to I.S.P Nation (2009) there are four different tasks that a teacher should go through in order to make sure that their students are able to improve their writing skills. Experience tasks, shared tasks, guided tasks, and independent tasks. The purpose of these tasks is meant for teachers to aware of what needs to be accomplished in order to help their students. Essentially this is something that everybody has to go through. You plan out an idea, talk about it in groups, narrow it down, and then you do it independently. Although these are basic steps you should take into consideration when it comes to writing tasks whether you are an L1 or L2 writer, the end result of how the writing task will come out is usually not mentioned.

Harper’s “How to Teach Writing” (2004) explains how teachers can prepare their students to write based on the task handed to them. For the most part some of the methods mentioned will come in hand for future teachers but there are a couple points that I find are missing. Some of the issues that you will come across include the fact that you will have the students that want to write like a native speaker and then you will have those who want to just want to accomplish the task. By introducing L2 writers the concept behind self representation and having a voice (Ivanic & Camps, 2001) in their writing can give them the opportunity to project their identity in writing.

Ivanic and Camps (2001), mention that unlike speaking, writing has no phonetic quality to it, leaving the writers virtually anonymous to their target readers. For non native speakers, when they speak we are able to identify the culture they belong to based on their accent. L2 writing leaves the writer without any type of identity, free from any type of social ties. However, target readers may not know the identity of the writer there are still implications of who they may be. People in general write based on their experience from participating in genres and discourses, generating a voice type from social interactions (I vanic and Camps, 2001, p. 6).

Based on Gee’s (2000) research, the term “Discourses” was created in reference to various practices of literacy in society and also “identity is understood as a social; as membership in particular social groups and discourse communities.” (pg 459. Lam). For example, if you want to be the “perfect student” you must always get A’s or being the “perfect child” means you have to do what you are told by your parents. This idea of creating a particular identity for L2 writers leads them to write based on how they want to be perceived by the target readers, instead of promoting themselves as an authorial writer. This is an obstacle most L2 writers will have to face, especially with academic writing.

Ken Hyland, a professor at University of Hong Kong specializes in topics such as second language writing did a research based on L2 students at a Hong Kong University. These undergrad students had to write reports based on their field. Some of these fields included biology, business, and social studies. The main focus of this research was to go into depth of how pronouns were being used in their reports. The field that separated itself from the others in my opinion was the biology field. In the biology field the pronoun “we” was used the most often in their reports. This is based on the fact that research is usually done by more than one person. A student mentioned that “In science we must be neutral and use the passive. It means that the research can be done by anybody else.” (Hyland, 2002, p. 1107) because of this idea that biology experiments are not done by just one person entails the students to involve everybody who was a part of it. Therefore by writing “we” they are still showing their personal role in the results they found without sounding inappropriate.

Like the Hong Kong students, the use of first person is also problem for L1 writers. Using “I” was discouraged by my English and Literature teachers, instead we were told to find other ways of stating our ideas. It was only when I entered university, using pronouns in academic writing was acceptable as long as you were certain in your own idea. As for the Hong Kong students their supervisors want them to be assertive in their writing but due to the lack of pronouns they appear to be hiding behind their writing. Another reason why these students may avoid using “I” is due to reasons transferred from their L1. In Asian cultures they believe in the idea of collectivism, therefore the use of first person is avoided because they feel uncomfortable, leading L2 writers to use other forms of commitment and representation as a writer.

Hyland (2005, p.178-181) defined hedges as “devices that indicate the writer’s decision to withhold complete commitment” and boosters as “writers to express their certainty in what they say”. Macintyre (2013) took a look into how these two methods were being used in argumentative essays done by first year Japanese students but also brought up other factors as to how pronouns were avoided. A study done by Hu and Cao (2011) found that there were more boosters used in Chinese academic journals compared to those in English which were more likely to hedge in order to commit to their writing. Confucianism was also another possible factor as to why boosters were being used by these students. In Confucian culture you have to convey a tone of authority in order to gain any type of credit.

For the Japanese students using boosters such as *should, very, and many* were being used to help strengthen their argument. Many of them stated the reason why was because they wanted the target reader to understand their certainty in their idea. Another reason was because their opinion came from their own experience or from other common beliefs that is viewed by many people. Because of fact that the students themselves can support their own opinion being presented, using boosters such as *should know* was their alternative way of using a pronoun. As for hedges they were being used when there was an insufficient amount of data to support their claim. Since the goals of these students were to write an argumentative essay, the use of hedges actually weakened their idea, essentially contradicting their thesis. This raises the awareness on how teachers can explain important linguistic features that can be used as guidance to better student’s in their writing.

Another cross cultural study done by Lam (2002) on L2 writing that focuses on the confidence needed is based on a Chinese boy named Almon that came from Hong Kong at the age of 12. This study began when Almon was a senior and even after five years of living in America he was still taking ESL classes, where the teacher used grammar charts and corrections to develop the student’s competence level. Almons inabilities to speak English like a native speaker lead him to believe that he won’t prosper in life. Almost two years later in college he took a computer class that introduced him to online chatting and created a home page based on his favorite J-pop singer, creating an identity in the J-pop community. Almon states in his interview that before he felt as if he never belonged, but now he was a part of a community where other people had the same interest, giving him motivation to strive as an individual.

With the help of the internet, Almon was introduced to other fellow internet users that held the same interest as he did in J-pop. Social interactions between female pen pals helped him open himself up, creating an authorial identity when he exchanged messages. Instead of having just a biographical identity, by playing different roles he was able to develop textual or rhetorical identities through electronic communication. (Lam, 20002). Although Almon is not using what most would consider “standard” written English, he is acquiring various discourses that is required to be a part of the pop culture and/or internet community.

Blogs have been the latest trend for people to write about practically anything to anyone that has access to internet. Due to the variety of blogs available there is something for everyone to read about. Readers are able to interact with other bloggers from different countries and are introduced to a variety of English spoken around the world. Since personal blogs are meant for bloggers to write based on their own voice, this also means you will find identity markers, giving readers a glimpse of their own background. Some of the personal blogs I looked into are from countries where English is an official language or from bloggers who are L2 writers of English.

Wendy Cheng Yan Yan otherwise known as XiaXue has been blogging full time since 2005 and is one of Singapore’s top bloggers. The blog consists of her personal life but the main reason why she is popular, aside from her pink hair, is because of how honest she is in her writing. No matter how controversial she may be at times the way she writes is based on her own viewpoint and has no problem expressing her emotions. English is one out of four of Singapore’s official languages and has a variety of influences from other countries, creating their own dialect otherwise known as Singlish. This type of Singapore English can be found throughout her blog entries, giving readers a chance to understand her identity.

An example of an identity marker in her writing is using the expression “lah”. This expression is often used to soften or enhance the tone of what they are saying. This is similar to how English speakers may emphasize “really” or “seriously” by elongating the word. In her blog entries you can find her using “lah” the most when she wants to express an emotion. For example, in her most recent blog entry she talks about all the changes her apartment went through when they remodeled it and states “I REALLY LOVE IT LAH!!” (Chen, 2012). The capitalization of the sentence already gives it a sense of excitement but using “lah” adds more emotion to how much she loves her new key less lock. Another example of how “lah” can be used in conjunction with other Singlish expressions is “PROUD SIMI SAI LAH SO UGLY.” (Chen, 2012). This roughly translates to “proud of what it’s so ugly”, here she talks about the changes her body has gone through due to pregnancy. By using these Singlish expressions throughout her blog embraces her national identity as a Singaporean-Chinese.

There is a similar identity marker, like “lah”, that I have come across by Japanese speakers which is the expression “dayo”. One particular friend that uses this quite often is a native speaker of Japanese but has been speaking English for over ten years now. When we communicate in English through text, she has a tendency of putting “dayo” at the end of a statement; similar to what was said about the use of “lah”. From what I have observed she only uses this amongst those who have some knowledge of Japanese, but tends to avoid it with native speakers of English and replaces it with something else equivalent to “dayo” but in English.

Some of the other blogs I looked into were from Cebu and Perth where English is spoken as an official language or widely used. Although these blogs did not have identity markers like “lah” and “dayo” there were some that categorized them into what type of English they spoke. For example, the blog from Cebu is created by a young creative that grew up in that region of the Philippines. I was able to indicate one identity marker that shows her connection to Cebu, and it was the use of “lalaking lalaki’s” (Uy, 2013) which roughly translates into “Manly Men”. This term is actually considered Cebuano, or Visayan which is derived from the island of Cebu where it is widely used. As for the blog from Perth, the capital of Western Australia, she is actually originally from Singapore but moved to Perth as a child. In her blog she uses “mum” instead of “mom”, commonly used in Australian and British English, essentially representing her Australian culture.

In the beginning when teachers are given methods on how to teach writing to L2 learners some the problems, such as creating an identity, are some bases that are never touched on until you face it. Unfortunately for many L2 learners their main objective is to be like a native speaker, but with writing, without any type of voice in it there is no authority and lacks confidence in what they want to say. By raising awareness on how future teachers can help their students in writing will give them the confidence they need to achieve their goals in academic writing. Introducing new methods of writing, such as the internet, gives the students the opportunity to write for various discourses which widens their knowledge of how to write in their L2.

Resources

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