



# From Contrastive Rhetoric towards Perceptions of Identity: Written Academic English in Central Mexico\*

## De la retórica del contraste a las percepciones de identidad: escritura académica en inglés en Méjico central.

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Received: 27-Aug-2012 / Accepted: 18-May-2013

### Abstract

This research looks at two students at the end of a four year period in academic writing as a second language using open interviews and textual analysis of academic papers. While the initial focus of the research was on the development of rhetorical features in academic texts, issues more oriented to identity construction emerged through the data analysis, implying that long term academic writing in a second language may be more akin to literacy development. The results seem to show that while the participants express a strong identity with English as writers, the actual writing is more in tune with conventions of Spanish. This suggests an apparent conflict of English as a tool for writing and Spanish as the language of the individual.

Key words: academic writing, EFL literacy, perception of discoursal identity

### Resumen

Esta investigación estudia la redacción académica en una lengua extranjera de dos alumnos en un período de cuatro años, utilizando entrevistas abiertas y análisis de ensayos académicos. Aunque el enfoque inicial de la investigación era del desarrollo de herramientas retóricas en textos académicos, algunos problemas relacionados con la construcción identitaria emergieron a través del análisis de los datos, lo cual podría indicar que el desarrollo a largo plazo de redacción académica en una segunda lengua puede estar más vinculado con lecto-escritura. Los resultados parecen mostrar que mientras los participantes expresan una fuerte identificación con el inglés, su escritura está más en sintonía con las convenciones de español. Esto sugiere un aparente conflicto con el inglés como herramienta de redacción y el español como lengua de expresión del individuo.

Palabras clave: lectoescritura, percepción de identidad discursiva, redacción académica,

### Résumé

Cette recherche étudie la rédaction académique dans une langue étrangère de deux étudiants dans une période de quatre ans, au moyen d'entretiens avec des questions ouvertes et l'analyse d'essais académiques. Bien que l'approche de départ ait été le développement d'outils rhétoriques dans des textes académiques, quelques problèmes associés à la construction identitaire sont apparus à travers l'analyse des données, ce qui pourrait indiquer que le développement à long terme de la rédaction académique en une seconde langue peut être davantage

\* This article reports findings of the research project titled: Proceso de asimilar una nueva comunidad de discurso a través de la instrucción formal en un programa académico impartido en inglés carried out at Universidad de Guanajuato and Secretaría de Educación Pública de México between August 2011 and August 2012



en lien avec la littératie. Les résultats semblent démontrer que tandis que les participants expriment une identification forte avec l'Anglais, son écriture est plus en phase avec les conventions de l'Espagnol. Cela suggère un conflit apparent avec l'Anglais comme outil de rédaction et l'Espagnol comme langue d'expression de l'individu.

Mots clés : littéracie, perception de l'identité discursive, rédaction académique,

### Resumo

Esta pesquisa estuda a redação acadêmica em uma língua estrangeira de dois alunos em um período de quatro anos, utilizando entrevistas abertas e análise de ensaios acadêmicos. Apesar de que o enfoque inicial da pesquisa era do desenvolvimento de ferramentas retóricas em textos acadêmicos, alguns problemas relacionados com a construção identitária emergiram através da análise dos dados, o qual poderia indicar que o desenvolvimento ao longo prazo da redação acadêmica em uma segunda língua, pode estar mais vinculado com leito-escrita. Os resultados parecem mostrar que enquanto os participantes expressam uma forte identificação com o inglês, sua escritura está mais em sintonia com as convenções de espanhol. Isto sugere um aparente conflito com o inglês como ferramenta de redação e o espanhol como língua de expressão do indivíduo.

Palavras chaves: leito-escrita, percepção de identidade discursiva, redação acadêmica,

## Introduction

This research explores the academic writing of two BA TESOL students in a public university in central Mexico. First we will look at the textual structure of their writing from a contrastive rhetoric perspective, and conclude with a deeper look at their perceptions of writer identity. The research will focus upon academic writing in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Mexico and examine how students attempt to enter into a written English academic discourse community. Although the term ELT refers to a multicultural profession that covers an enormous range of teaching and learning situations in many different contexts, the focus of this research is necessarily narrower; we will be investigating within the context of a BA TESOL program in a public university in Mexico based upon the perspectives of two students. The background of these students varies, but how they have used English in their academic studies in the university is identical.

Focusing on elements of contrastive rhetoric of written work and the voices of writer identity, the major concern of the research is how these two participants in the learning process perceive the learning of academic writing in English. While academic writing tends to be tertiary in the amount of time devoted to it in the program, it is a part of the entire degree process as written essays are the main samples for

assessment. This research looks at the acquisition of academic literacy as a complex long-term activity. It is not intuitive to native speakers of English, and poses additional challenges for non-native speakers of English because of their possible lack of linguistic, social, cultural and discursive knowledge of the discipline (Cheng, 2013) and the tendency of "new directions in contrastive rhetoric that focus on the processes that lead to the final written products and describe the complexities of the cultural, social, situational and contextual factors affecting writing" (Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares, and Gil-Salom, 2011,p.5). Thus far, a perception standpoint has rarely been taken to analyse how non-native speakers view themselves as authors.

To do this, we will explain our interest and offer a literature review of EFL/ESL writing instruction and contrastive rhetoric for the research. Then we will outline the data collection methods, analyse the textual structure, and explore the students' perceptions. Finally, we will include the findings of our research.

### *Our Interest in the Research*

We are interested in this theme because second language research is part of our practice in the world of academics. Another concern is the effectiveness of our program and our students' learning process

in their academic writing in English throughout their BA studies. One question we ask ourselves is if the training we give our students aids them along their journey to become part of an English academic writing community.

### *Overview of Traditional EFL/ESL Writing Instruction*

In order to look at our context, we will provide an overview of EFL/ESL writing.

#### *Basic assumptions*

To analyse the current state of EFL/ESL writing, first it is necessary to start with the general concept of EFL/ESL writing and how this has undergone changes throughout the past decades. It is made clear that speaking and writing are not different ways of doing the same thing; rather, they are two distinct forms of using language (Brookes and Grundy, 1998; Byrne, 1988; Halliday, 1985; Johns, 1997; Raimes, 1983). Halliday (1985) makes reference to an evolution of writing in the following:

Writing evolves when language has to take on new functions in society. These tend to be the prestigious functions, those associated with learning, religion, government, and trade. (p. xv)

Hence, writing that one of the aspects of composition writing is its influential connection to teaching practices, (Henry, 2000, pp.1-4, citing Berlin) the patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness is the main end of writing instruction. This critique is extended, noting shortcomings of such instruction in the realms of purpose and audience as well as the narrow range of subject positions offered to writers:

In current-traditional pedagogy students' papers are not constructed as messages that might command assent or rejection. Nor do current-traditional teachers constitute an audience in any rhetorical sense of that word, since they read not to learn or be amused or persuaded, but to weigh and measure a paper's adherence

to formal standards. Hence the current-traditional theory of discourse is not rhetoric but a theory of graphic display, and so it perfectly met the humanist requirement that students' expression of character be put under constant surveillance so they could be "improved" by correction. (Henry, 2000, pp.2-3)

Therefore, composition is conceptualized as: "an endeavour consisting in mastering forms, engaging little disciplinary content knowledge" (Russell, 1991, p.50).

As a result, what emerges as 'traditional EFL/ESL writing' is closely related to "scientific positivism" and tends to view written language as a description of facts and rules that are allocated in a two dimensional textbook (Johns, 1997, pp.6-8). This was the driving force in the 1960s and 1970s when applied linguistics focused on research that dealt primarily with count features of language. This focused the teaching of writing on lists of grammatical and lexical 'facts' as they have been discerned through quantitative research (Johns, 1997, pp.6-19). This coincides with the research of Henry (2000, pp. ix-xiv) in that the dominance of the Harvard model in the 1970s influenced classroom practice of only teaching aspects of forms and graphic display to students. This was transferred to classroom practice which focuses on factual organizational models through imitation (Johns, 1997; Silva, 1990). There are minor differences but the general focus is on surface level standard descriptions of formal language.

The core of traditional theories is: "literacy is acquired through direct practice, focused on the production of perfect, formally organized language patterns and discourses" (Johns, 1997, p.7). Richards and Rogers (1986) comment that "good habits are formed by giving a correct response rather than making mistakes" (p.50). What this type of classroom framing does is to lead to a domain where:

...the learner is a passive recipient of expert knowledge and direction. Not surprisingly, the role of the teacher is that



of expert and authority, the person who directs all student learning....for traditional theories, language and textual forms are central. (Johns, 1997, p.7)

Here the student becomes a passive participant in a process that tends to focus on the production of a classroom genre (Gray, 2002).

### *Impact and uses*

This historical line leads to the basic formation of academic concepts that have become the foundation of second language writing and have made a direct impact on instruction in the classroom (Crawford, 2007, pp.76-77; 2010). As a consequence the teaching of EFL/ESL writing can be considered from different points of view. Raimes (1991, pp.408-413) in her review of ESL writing comments historically on a series of traditions under the following classification: focus on form (1966) where writing was used to reinforce oral patterns of the language; focus on the writer (1976) where the ideas of making meaning, invention and multiple drafts led to the process approach; focus on content (1986) where the demands of the academy are considered and content based instruction emerges; and focus on the reader (1986) where the expectations of the reader are dominant and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is born. Silva (1990, pp.11-17), in his historical sketch of second language composition, outlines the following categories: controlled-composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for Academic Purposes. It must be noted that Silva (1990) does specify that this approach is oriented to creating writers that will conform to the expectations of an American academic institution. These categories are almost identical in concept to those offered by Raimes (1991, pp.408-413) and supply a general overview of the major developments in the approaches to teaching ESL writing. What makes these categorizations different and how do they work in theory? The following four points describe different approaches from a variety of authors:

1. The Controlled Composition Approach sees writing as a secondary activity, as a means of practicing structures and vocabulary learned in the classroom. Therefore, the context for writing is the classroom and the audience is the teacher. This approach focuses on form and accuracy, and writing is simply a means of assessing the students' ability to manipulate the structures practiced in the classroom (Mahfoundi, 2001).
2. According to Mahfoundi (2001), the Current-Traditional Rhetoric orientation places writing in the limited context of the classroom, and the teacher as the target audience. What differentiates this orientation from the previous one is the emphasis it places on text organization and students have to learn how to identify and use prescribed patterns.
3. The Process Approach which is theoretically supported by Flower and Hayes' (1981) model of composition focuses on writers and the process they undergo while composing written texts. Writing is thought to convey meaning and is a "complex, recursive, and creative process" (Silva, 1990, p.15). Rather than simply focusing on accuracy, the process approach aims at developing students' composition process in a holistic fashion. This goal implies that students need to acquire experience in writing for several purposes, in various contexts, and addressing different audiences (Hairstone, 1982).
4. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is concerned with the production of writing within a specific context and is directed towards pre-defined readers. While the former approach aims at wider contexts and audiences, ESP is characterized by specific targets: e.g., the context may be the academic or the business world, and the audience may be members of the academic community or business people. As English for Specific Purposes aims at enabling students to produce written texts that will be accepted by experts in their fields, courses based on this approach try to "recreate the conditions under which actual...writing tasks



are done" (Silva, 1990, p.17), and have students practice genres and tasks commonly required in their jobs or educational environment. Therefore, English for Specific Purposes focuses exclusively on the production of writing within a specific context, and it is mainly concerned with the reader's reaction towards the written text. (Silveira, 1999, p.111)

The aforementioned approaches all hold some concepts in common. Written language is different from spoken language. There is a need to aid second language students in developing their ability to write in English. There are different types of genres that students need to learn. Genre is apparently evident when considering the assumptions that surround the process approach and EAP. Furthermore, these categories also hold something much more important in common; they have a tendency to minimize the student's native language or culture and the influence these can have on the production of written texts. Writing patterns are presented as something that the student must conform to in order to be acceptable (Canagarajah, 2002, pp.125-157; Crawford, 2007, 2010; Pennycook, 2001; Purves, 1988; Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999, p.45; Smitherman and Villanueva, 2003). A natural consideration to the above would be to look at contrastive rhetoric because it offers a framework that highlights cultural differences in how texts are organized.

In second language writing contrastive rhetoric has played a powerful role in defining many concepts that we often apply. The explanatory framework employed by contrastive rhetoric is useful for this research for several reasons. First, at the core of contrastive rhetoric is the notion that logic is a cultural phenomenon (Kaplan, 1967; Ruanni and Tupas, 2006, p.2). Rhetorical expectation and conventions, therefore, differ among cultures

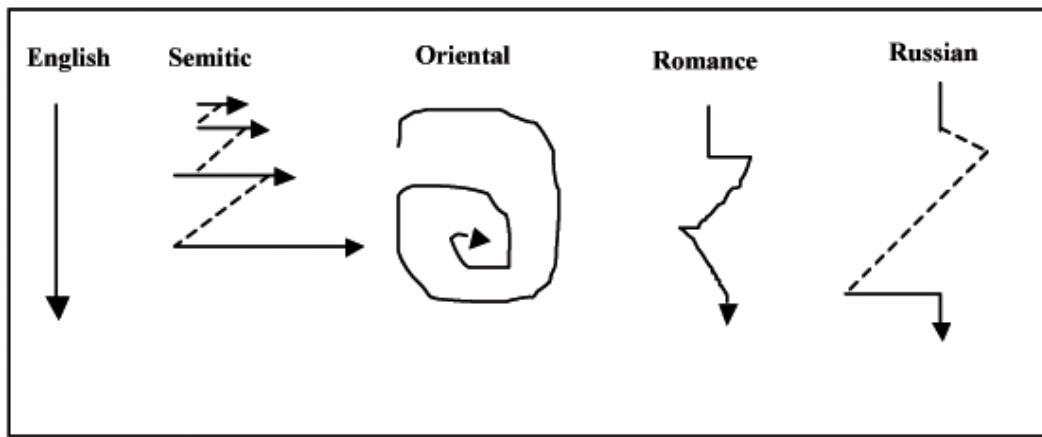
(Liebman, 1988, p.6). Second, contrastive rhetoric has its origins in and is partly related to English language pedagogy: it "examines differences and similarities in EFL and ESL writing across languages and cultures as well as across such different contents as education and commerce" (Connor, 2002, p.493). Since this research is concerned with second language writers this framework is useful. Finally, contrastive rhetoric has sufficient empirical evidence to lend some serious consideration to its claims:

The accumulating evidence from contrastive rhetoric research warrants the view that linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds have some influence in the organizational structures of ESL text, although they are by no means the only factors. (Matsuda, 1997, p.48)

The origins of the contrastive rhetoric tradition is generally attributed to the classic essay of Kaplan in 1967 where he presented a series of doodles (see Figure 1) that he assumed explained the expository developments of paragraphs written by second language learners that deviate from what would be expected in the United States. Even today this article is still very powerful and early contrastive rhetoric, therefore, has functioned within the various rhetorical structures which emerged from the original article. It still finds its way into teacher training workshops and publications (Kubota and Lehner, 2004). In his article Kaplan presents the following 'diagrams' that are supposed to represent the developmental patterns of advanced ESL writers. It should be noted that "according to Matsuda, Kaplan was only trying to show that L2 students were not suffering from cognitive deficits but revealing the influence of different rhetorical traditions in their L1s" (Casanave, 2004, p.29).



**Figure 1.** Kaplan's rhetorical structures



The impact of contrastive rhetoric on second language writing is clearly noteworthy and has definitely had a strong impact based on the well-documented research that exists in the area. In brief, contrastive rhetoric:

1. identifies the possible causes for the apparent lack of coherence in second language texts (Matsuda, 1997, p. 47);
2. provides teachers with some insights that can guide their decisions in developing curriculum and in responding to second language students' needs (Matsuda, 1997, p. 47);
3. develops some understanding of students' native rhetorical choices, bridging rhetorical gaps so writer, instructor, and even peer reader have a common ground from which to work on the writing (Panetta, 2001, p.11);
4. helps instructors who teach writing to second language students see that our truth is not the truth. (Panetta, 2001, p.5);
5. provides students and learners with rhetorical choices (Liebman, 1988, p.17);
6. promotes cultural decentering (Liebman, 1988, p.17).

Nevertheless, the results of these studies are not without conflict. The underlying assumptions that

exist within these studies tend to reflect an essentialist thinking and may reflect more the prescriptive expectations of US scholars within a particular kind of educational system rather than from an understanding of world Englishes (Casanave, 2004, pp.37-39). In themselves, these rhetorical observations are fine, but when English is the benchmark used to interpret them, it becomes potentially damaging to the student.

However, if it is not perceived with English as the benchmark, contrastive rhetoric does alert instructors of the need to bring a rhetorical awareness to the classroom. According to Casanave (2004) teachers and students need to be familiar with knowledge of rhetorical patterns of arrangement, composing conventions, the morphosyntax of the target language, and writing conventions, audience, and subject (pp.43-44).

Nevertheless, an increase in awareness does not necessarily translate into an improvement in classroom results, nor does it imply a distinct approach for the teaching of writing. It is more about the creation of a more knowable environment for the second language writers to develop their skills.

Stronger conclusions are perhaps needed in the area of contrastive rhetoric. There are still many on-going questions that need to be resolved in this



disciplinary field. According to Casanave (2004), the concept of a paragraph is different between French and English. In a French paragraph loose collections of data are used; whereas in English it is necessary to use topic sentences (Casanave, 2004, p.47). In the German language, scholars write much more digressively. They are less likely than English writers to place topic sentences early in the paragraph (Clyne, 1987).

It is presumed that it is possible to identify formal features, such as patterns of rhetorical organization across different languages and cultures. Then, this knowledge can be used to help students learn how to write in culturally and rhetorically appropriate ways (Connor, 1996). Unfortunately, it seems that more evidence is necessary before this can be considered a fact (Casanave, 2004), especially, in terms of defining the conceptual contribution of culture and its relationship to rhetorical patterns (Atkinson, 2004).

Basically the situation is that contrastive rhetoric points out many differences between English and many other languages. The problem is that there are many questions as to what the source is for those differences, according to Casanave (2004, pp.52-55). There is also, the issue that maybe more focus should be given to the similarities that exist between languages rather than highlighting the differences. In the end the issue is that clearer evidence is needed to have a definite conclusion. As researchers, we think that through a more open qualitative perspective rather than adhering only to an existing model, additional insight may be gained concerning how students process a second language in writing. With this idea of keeping the aforementioned present, but not being limited by it, we proposed the following.

## Methodology

The research questions used that guided this study are:

How do two students in the BA TESOL program at the University of Guanajuato identify themselves with the activity of academic writing in English as a second or foreign language?

What are their perspectives of learning how to write academically during the BA program?

This small scale study takes on a dual approach in methods. Dual, because it is not an issue of mixed or combined methods. Firstly, we carried out an analysis of the written academic work of the two students and then we interviewed them on two different occasions to find out their perspectives. The analysis was a straightforward study of the internal structure of selected written texts of the participants. The written texts were considered to be academic artefacts as they were given as assignments during their four years of study. The two participants were given the opportunity to choose a written text from each year with a total of eight texts (four texts per participant). The only guideline given was that they chose what they felt was their best work from each year. Compositions were analysed for rhetorical structure and statistically with the software *WordSmith Tools*.

Secondly, we looked at the students' expressed identity as academic English writers through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1 for guiding questions). In this stage the research shifts to a qualitative paradigm, where the analysis was concerned with the feelings and perceptions of the participants in order to contrast them with the internal structure of their writing. It focused on the students' perception of belonging to an English academic writing community, along with their views concerning the process of learning to write in English for academic purposes as well as how they learned to write in English. The interviews were carried out by two of the researchers and audio-taped.

Interviews were chosen as a research tool because they can generate useful information about lived experience and its meaning. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refer to interviews as conversations and that it is "the art of asking questions and listening" (p. 643). However, interviews are influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity and gender (*ibid*). The objective of these



interviews was to know more about their experiences in writing, not only in English but also in Spanish and to know if they perceived a preference for either one of the languages. The students had the opportunity to select in which language they would like to be interviewed.

Interviews were held individually because they provide a richer conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee (Gaskell, 2000; Rapley, 2007). In this manner, they can provide more meaningful data. Interviews were conceived as semi-structured. The main reason was to set the topic and let the students express their opinions (Allison 2001). This type was also open to emerging topics, without the constraints structured interviews have (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). From these two sources of data (texts analysis and interviews) we then carried out the analysis.

### **Participants**

Two students were selected from the last current semester of the BA TESOL program. Because we wanted to do a small scale research, the research project was explained to a class of fourteen students and two students volunteered. It should be mentioned that these students are practicing teachers and both have had extended living experiences in the United

States. The two participants were given a consent form and we have changed their names for confidentiality reasons to Maria and Carlos.

### **Findings**

When the initial written samples of academic English were processed using Wordsmith, a word list showing the lexical frequency was produced. This is one of the options of the Wordsmith program. This software Also, gave us statistics about the basic structure of the text and we were able to see more in detail the type of texts that students generated. In the written work, the students produced more sentences and more paragraphs; these two elements were slightly longer than the norm for English. Their writing structure in English seemed somewhat closer to Spanish, but not enough to be significant. This information is interesting in that it coincides with part of the results from previous studies which compare writing in Spanish and English in a composition format of native speakers (e.g., Montaño-Harmon, 1991; Santana-Seda, 1975; Santiago, 1971; Simpson, 2000). First, consider previous studies as it is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Analysis of academic paragraphs in English and Spanish

<b>General Data</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Spanish</b>
Total number of words	3,240	2,491
Average words per paragraph	162	124.5
Total number of sentence	135	76
Average sentences per paragraph	6.75	3.8
Average words per sentence	24	32.8 (Simpson, 2000, p.299)

Now the results from the current study:



**Table 2.** Statistical analysis of compositions of two students' academic writing in English

Average number of words per composition	1252.25
Average words per paragraph	117.85
Total number of sentences per composition:	43.37
Average sentences per paragraph	3.6
Average words per sentence:	30.42 (Research data)

This lends support to the concepts presented by Abbott (1996) relating to the rhetorical structure of written Mexican Spanish and how it is different from the rhetorical structure of written American English. Abbott (1996, p.35) states that "Mexican oratory is structurally additive rather than subordinative, stylistically copious and redundant and thematically conservative". The statistical results confirm specifically the aspects of stylistically copious and redundant writing in Mexican Spanish. Furthermore, it shows a tendency to write in English as if it were Spanish, as can be seen in the average words per sentence and the average sentences per paragraph.

The statistical information in the above tables concerning their writing in English seems more parallel to Spanish in structure. However, in the interviews, the students claimed a strong identity as writers of English. Given that the statistical analysis was apparently in conflict with what the students' stated, we decided that the best course of action was to delve deeper into the "why" of the information. Therefore, at this point, we took on a more qualitative direction to find out what the perceptions and motivation of the two students in terms of their academic writing were. In order to do this we carried out the interviews.

## Analysis and Discussion of Interview Findings

Five themes emerged from the data analysis of the interviews. In the following we explore each theme in detail.

### *Strong Identification with English*

From the interview data analysis a theme which emerged is that both research participants indicate a strong identification with the English language over Spanish. Despite being native speakers of Spanish, each participant cites specific reasons for preferring English in their professional and personal activities. Maria states having difficulties when using Spanish in writing, such as when writing paragraphs:

...when I write paragraphs and I have to connect them in Spanish, it is more difficult for me to use certain words in order for the ideas to be connected...I have more ability to reflect my ideas better in English than in Spanish.

When referring to using the English language in writing, she also says:

When it's in English I feel that it's more fluent and I am more capable of writing my ideas in English than when I do it in Spanish. It is much easier for me to do it in English.

She clearly views English as a better and more 'comfortable' medium than the Spanish language to communicate her ideas successfully. These data samples suggest she uses English as a sort of safety net to fall back on when she needs to express her ideas more clearly. She states that she feels "more confident and safe using English instead of Spanish...".



In a similar line, Carlos mentions:

I think I feel more comfortable writing in English than in Spanish but you know Spanish is my first language but I feel more comfortable, more secure, writing in English.

In the above, Carlos claims to feel more at ease and confident with English. He also recognizes that his native language is Spanish but credits his identification with and preference for writing in English to the fact that his training and academic/professional practice has primarily been in English.

Both participants also describe extensive exposure and lived experiences within an English-speaking context at different times during their lives which they offer as possible reasons for their strong identification with English. Maria grew up near the Mexico-USA border, studied in California and lived for 15 years in Texas. Carlos resided in the USA for ten years starting at age seventeen, and while there he studied in high school and community college. During this time he took writing classes in both institutions. As the previous comments indicate, both had experience within educational environments where they were required to write in English. This suggests that their identification with English might stem from the fact that the education they received in terms of 'formal' writing instruction during their formative years was in an English-speaking/writing context and not in a Spanish-speaking context. Yet, it should be mentioned that in their homes, Spanish was the only language used. Being in direct and constant contact with that language, specifically in its written form, as well as speaking with people in English "all the time" made them feel they had to produce the English language and that it essentially came more naturally for them due to their lived experiences in an English-speaking context, the United States. At the same time there is a sense of a battle occurring in the construction of a clear authorial identity. On one side, there is the reference to learning to write in English in formal education, but on the other side is the reference to Spanish 'you know Spanish is my first language'.

This may be causing a conflict at some level in the participants writing. In summary, it could be seen as, I identify with English, but Spanish is my language.

#### *English Is Considered More Practical and Precise*

The data suggests that both participants mention English as being more practical and precise for them. They use terms such as "analytical", "structured", "fluent" and "specific" to describe their perception of the writing they do in English. Writing in Spanish, however, suffers in comparison when the participants use the terms such as "confusing", "complicated" and "complex". They both indicate they feel more comfortable writing in English saying that the language seems to "flow" better and they can express themselves more specifically without using too many words. Yet, this may seem unusual in the sense that writing in English was much more closely structured as if it were Spanish (see Table 2). In spite of this statistical fact, this particular theme would seem to fall within the previous theme, that of the participants identifying more with English writing. It also suggests that they chose the specific terms mentioned above to possibly distance themselves from their identification with their L1 (first language) while attempting to strengthen their self-perceived identification with English.

#### *Spanish Writing Course Should Not Be Required in the BA Program*

One of the topics covered in the interviews was whether the participants might suggest any modifications to the BA program in which they are enrolled. In response, Carlos offers the following:

Well...I think first that we shouldn't have writing in Spanish... Redacción [Writing] in Spanish...I have talked to other classmates and they all agree that we shouldn't...

Maria also stated:

My experience with that subject [Redacción] was difficult. I didn't



understand why we had to take it. I couldn't see the connection as to why the subject is in the program...what we saw in that class has no applicability to what we are doing now...I did not learn anything meaningful.

Both mentioned different suggestions for change but the most prevalent theme detected in the data which both participants emphasized was their belief that the course in their BA TESOL program named Writing in Spanish was perhaps not as influential in their professional development and they questioned its existence within the curriculum. Despite indicating that they had in fact learned about writing in Spanish in that class none of the two considered the class as relevant in their teacher-training process as English language teachers. This begs the question of whether they perceive this course, as well as the Spanish language itself, as interference or an obstacle to their development as English language writers. It does seem to follow the underlying theme described above of the participants distancing themselves from Spanish, hence removing the 'obstacle' in their path by suggesting it be eliminated from the program altogether. There is also a perception of the participants 'otherizing' the Spanish language from their particular context as bi-lingual in-service English teachers studying a degree program. Despite Spanish is their L1, they appear to refer to it in the context of this research and their BA program as something perhaps inferior to the English language. This is evident in the discourse they choose to use in their responses to the interview questions and in the specific words they selected as well. For example, Carlos mentions:

[...] if I had to choose writing in Spanish or in English, I would choose English. I don't feel like identified like writing in Spanish as I said I can write something but academically in Spanish, no.

Maria, also comments about her lack of identification or limited use of Spanish:

Spanish is more like... for sending messages or leaving a note to someone, or maybe to write letters. When I had to write letters to someone from Mexico or sometimes I was brought some books and I started to write.

This would seem to imply that the students might be on a path of trying to find their identity as authors in English, as defined by Ivanič (1998). In this sense it would be understandable that the participants see Spanish as perhaps an obstacle in their pursuit of finding an identity in English as writers. An obstacle in the sense that Spanish is the personal or first language of the person and that English may be seen as a tool for writing, in their profession. it could Also, imply that there might be a cross-cultural dimension at play when L2 learners summarize texts that are causing interference and are interpreted by the students being associated with the language from a cultural viewpoint rather a rhetorical one (Abasi, 2012).

#### *More Writing Practice Desired*

The research participants expressed a desire for more academic writing instruction and practice in their BA TESOL program. Both describe the two academic writing courses they took as positive learning experiences; however, they also indicate that they would benefit from even more writing coursework. Specifically, Carlos suggests that more time in those classes be dedicated to writing on the topics from the syllabus.

I always got a good grade because I like [the subject] but I think that if we had had more time we could have focused more on more details...you know...for instance, the last we had. I think that it was very very interesting but the problem was with the time and we didn't focus too much on those topics...you know...in specific and that since we were asked to write papers from one week to another and write one paper, one contrastive or like paper or like this paper we didn't paying attention to the things we had to take into account.



As soon as we delivered the paper, we focused on something else, you know, and then on something else, and then we didn't have time to go back and check again.

It seems, he believes that the pace of the course, while being an interesting course, is somewhat fast and does not allow students enough time to properly develop their ideas and writing skills, and that, possibly, more courses should allow for more time for students to spend on the different topics and tasks they are expected to complete, as well as write more papers which would help them to develop their skills even more. Maria suggests the creation of workshops where students can discuss and help each other identify strengths and weaknesses in their writing:

Maybe to have workshops where, in an objective and constructive way, we can share with the rest of the group our perceptions of how we write. This would help us to have our ideas clear and precise. As I mentioned before, I went through this when my classmates told me something about my writing, I could realize that I was doing something wrong, for me at the beginning it was OK until someone else told me "I just don't understand what you are saying" and I explained "I mean this..." and they replied "I don't understand". I think workshops could help us, it is not just about receiving feedback from teachers but from our classmates so we can help each other and have a better writing competence.

### *More Is Learnt from Peer Feedback*

The aforementioned workshops that Maria proposes introduce another important theme that emerges from the data, and it is that students believe that they benefit more from peer feedback during their writing process. Their attitude towards the writing courses and feedback from their teachers is in fact positive. Nonetheless, they indicate that there is a preference for receiving feedback from their peers regarding their writing process. This phenomenon

stems from the idea that the students feel more comfortable in a setting where the people reviewing their writing samples are in fact deemed as equals. Both the writers and the reviewers find themselves in a situation that essentially encourages the type of critique which is less inhibited or diluted to avoid hurting the other's feelings, and in turn it is received as honest and constructive.

The other sub layer of this theme came out in an informal conversation with the participants after the initial data collection. Both indicated that each teacher in the program appears to give their personal view or preferences for writing. This seems to complicate matters for the students as they are looking for a constant by which to be guided. The conversations seem to suggest that teachers in the program could be causing some interference towards their ability to create guidelines to follow, when writing in English. For example, Carlos mentions the following:

I get confused at times because each teacher asks me to something different. Sometimes it's like they care about my writing sometimes and other times they don't.

This would fall in line with the idea of having a questioning approach to writing as outlined in Critical Language Awareness (CLA) from the perspective of Clark (1992, 1993) and Ivanić (1998). This refers to socially situated learning, mainstreaming, and a questioning approach. Here specifically the issue of why conventions/practices are the way they are comes to light. The issue here is that from the participant's perception the teaching staff is generating confusion in terms of writing conventions. This in turn, implies the possibility of teachers focusing more on conventions than actual writing. This could reinforce the idea that more time needs to be given, but possible also focus on contrastive rhetoric in the sense of discussing with the students issues about acquiring a new rhetorical identity within the confines of the second language.



## Conclusions and Implications

In essence what we have found here is a fork in the road. We began this project with the idea of looking at Spanish and English in terms of their respective rhetorical structure, to see how students in the BA program are progressing in their development of writing. What we have discovered is that the process we thought was occurring was not. The participants seem to be locked in the process of discovering their identity as writers of English as well as finding discrepancies in the program itself. This last finding refers to the idea that teachers may be generating interference in terms of consistency in the conventions of writing. Furthermore, this is compounded by the fact that while the participants express a strong identity with English as writers, the actual writing is more in tune with conventions of Spanish. This seems to come from this apparent conflict of English as a tool for writing and Spanish as the language of the individual. The statistical data also suggests this same idea, in the sense that from a purely textual analysis the participants' texts were more in line with a Spanish language rhetorical structure.

Finally, what Carlos said at the second interview "maybe if we can keep doing this in our masters' degree, it [writing] will get clearer" seems to sum up this initial project. The participants are on a longer journey towards something more in sync with the creation of a discoursal-self in English and the creation of an identity as an author, rather than on a simple path of acquiring English for writing. In addition, it would seem that there is a type of process of learning how to separate the languages that is occurring. The aforementioned implies that the traditional or mainstream EFL/ESL writing approaches appear to be ineffective for writing development at this level. It would seem that the students are at a point where they require more time and more opportunity to practice manipulating the language. We say this because it would explain, at least partially, why there was 'an identification of a language preference' with English, yet a more written Spanish style text structure. This

could imply that there is more of a need for time to sort out a new authorial identity for writing in English. An activity that in many senses goes beyond the scope of the traditional EFL writing framework and enters more into an area of second language literacy.

In conclusion, we can see how complex academic writing is for students and for teachers. It is our belief that we need to do more studies including other groups of students who have not had out-of-country experiences to better understand the process of academic writing from the students' perspective. We should also, maintain contact with the current participants to see what evolution occurs in their future studies in academic writing. Further research needs to be carried out in the EFL context on writing and more specifically academic writing because it seems we cannot assume the traditional ESL process follows the same process as an individual's development of a writing identity in a second language.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview on Discourse Communities

1. Do you see any differences between writing in English and Spanish?  
(Examples of differences)
  2. Do you feel comfortable writing in English?  
(Why or why not?)
  3. Do you think you are accepted as a writer in the academic community that you write in?  
(What creates the feeling of acceptance or rejection? Is there proof of acceptance?)
  4. Do you consider yourself as part of the English academic writing community in the BA program?  
(How is this decision made? Is it external or internal validation?)
  5. Do you think your writing in English has evolved as a part of the BA program?  
(Examples, Is it because of classes? Is it practice? Is it feedback?)
  6. Do you think the BA program has helped you in your writing?  
(Can you give examples? Should changes be made?)
  7. Do you think you have an identity as an English language writer?  
(What elements compose the identity? Where are you in your writing?)
  8. Do you have an identity as a Spanish language writer?
- 
1. The term EFL/ESL has been used because while the theories in ELT are based mostly on American Composition Theory in an ESL setting the participants are studying in an EFL context. This was decided to attempt to represent the complexity of looking at writing in English as a second language in a non-English speaking country.



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