Self-assessment Activities in a Second Language (L2) Writing Class: Student Negotiations of Cultural Identities

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Abstract: In the field of composition studies, self-assessment has been mostly conceptualized as any activity that asks students to reflect upon and write about their own writing and learning. Other scholars deem self-assessment as a dialogue between the educational system, the teacher and the learner (Kusnic & Finley, 2006). I understand and conceptualize self-assessment as instances in which students reflect upon their own learning processes and writing products, and then write about those positioning themselves as active creators and negotiators of knowledge rather than passive receptors. This paper reports on part of a larger qualitative case study that investigated how Second Language (L2) learners in a writing classroom understood and used self-assessment activities. Specifically, the larger qualitative study focused on rhetorical strategies L2 writers used when they reflected upon and assessed their own writing. By identifying the most commonly used rhetorical strategies, such as thanking, making statements, asking questions, it also became clear that those L2 writers positioned themselves in various identity traits, such as good student, assertive writer, and culturally influenced learner, inter alia. The larger qualitative study used three different sources of data: observation, documents (self-assessment forms and activities), and interviews. This paper concentrates on how two female L2 writers used rhetorical strategies in self-assessment activities, namely a *reflection* activity, and a semi-structured exit interview to negotiate their cultural and gender identities.

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Introduction

Much research has been conducted in contrastive rhetoric (L1 vs. L2 learners) to point out commonalities and differences, but not much work has focused on the L2 writing classroom to understand the mechanisms of how L2 writers learn (Gardner & Rea-Dickins, 2002; Rea-Dickens, 2001; Schendel & O'Neill, 1999). Scholars in the fields of critical pedagogy and Second Language[*] Acquisition (SLA) have extensively examined identity in the ESL classroom (Brown, Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Cameron, 2006; Cervero & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Canagarajah, 1993, 2002, 2003; English, 2005; Gordon, 2004; Heller, 2007; Higgins, 2010; Mojab & Gorman, 2003; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000; Prins 2001, Ricento, 2002); however, intersectionalities among various identity traits such as "gender, class, race, or sexual orientation as identity issues" (Leki, Cummins & Silva, 2008, p. 66) remain largely underexplored. Some scholars have explored intersectionalities between gender, race and language learning (Davis & Skilton-Silvester, 2004; Kubota & Lin, 2006), sexual orientation and language learning (Nelson, 2009), or even identity, race and ethnicity (Lynn et al. 2004; Luke, 2009), but more research is needed not only in the US, but also across L2 contexts. Thus, this study has attempted to contribute to our fields in understanding how different identity traits (mainly gender and home culture) are interconnected in helping students negotiate among various identities and knowledge. This study has also endeavored to answer questions on how certain identity features help and/or disrupt negotiations in an L2 writing context so that we can revise our teaching practices and pedagogies to ensure that they are more inclusive of differences; besides, this study also purported to understand whether self-reflective activities can provide spaces for students to engage in true dialogue, and, thus, help composition instructors discover more effective ways to help those students negotiate their academic lives.

Although much research has also focused on the value of self-assessment to improve students' writing (Douglas, 2000; Douglas & Brown; 2003; Kavaliauskiené, Kaminskiené, & Anusiené, 2007), no research endeavor I am aware of has asked how certain identity features can help or refrain students' negotiations and/or resistance. Journals have been used as a means to reflect (Oxford et al., 1996), but not self-assessment activities. Manami Suzuki has investigated issues of identity negotiations among L2 learners but in terms of linguistic analysis of revisions not in terms of

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[*] Any term used to refer to speakers of languages other than English is contested and controversial. For the purpose of this paper, I use L2 writers in the theoretical background section because some of the theories I use are from the field of Second Language Writing, but also because, for most of my students, English is their second language.

reflection and negotiation. Besides, according to Manami Suzuki (2006), issues of negotiation in second language acquisition have been studied for the last three decades, but without much attention to "self-revision" (p. 1). Suzuki's dissertation and related publications and Lee's dissertation and connected publications delve into understanding L2 writers' identity negotiations as they revise their drafts (Suzuki) and participate or reject certain classroom discourses (Lee). Furthermore, Heidi L. Andrade, Xiaolei Wang, Ying Du & Robin L. Akawi (2009) have developed a study to examine the interaction between students' gender and rubrics including self-assessments to find that self-assessment helped the female participants boost their self-confidence, but their study is not focused on reflection either.

Acquiring insights on how certain identity features affect L2 writers is crucial to teachers because it can help us to better understand students' investment and struggles and, consequently, make our practices more inclusive so that students who belong to other cultures may not feel ostracized in our classrooms.

Review of Relevant Literature

1.1. Self-assessment

Within the field of writing assessment, recent trends that search to find more "authentic" types of assessment have prompted the phenomenon of self-assessment (also named "self-monitoring" by Andy Creswel). Thus, when students reflect on their learning/knowledge acquisition process, they also start forming new voices and writing styles or discourses that blend the old and the new. Consequently, if writing instructors create self-assessment tools, which are based on grounded theories, L2 learners may become slowly familiarized with the new academic context and instructors' demands and expectations by learning how to negotiate their identities and prior knowledge without abandoning their own culturally and socially constructed identities prior to their arrival in the United States.

Self-assessment has been part of composition studies for the last thirty years. Brian Huot (2002b) outlined that students' self-assessment has been crucial to composition both in terms of instructive practices (Beaven, 1997; Marting, 1991) and investigation projects (Beach, 1976; Beach & Eaton, 1984). Kathleen Blake Yancey (1998) argued that reflection (as practiced in self-assessment activities) has played a very insignificant part in composition studies so far, but she advocates for more self-assessment activities that foster reflection. If L2 writing instructors include self-assessment/reflective activities in the classroom, power dynamics could be altered as well, as Marie Eaton & Rita Pougiales (1993), and Ruth Dann (2002), among others, have noted.

2.1.1 Identity Negotiations

With structuralism and post-structuralism, language becomes crucial and central to constructing and understanding reality. Besides, post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism produce a new understanding of major social forces, such as identity, language, ideology, inter alia, that come to be conceived of as in flux, variable and in the making rather than fixed. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of social theorists that defined the social and cultural nature of language (Bourdieu, Foucault) and of literacy (Gee, Street) influenced the field of L2 writing as well during the 1980s. Based on social constructionist and postmodern theories, identities are, thus, not considered monolithic or static, but "complex, perpetually evolving, and sensitive to such diverse social constructs as social status, education, language contact, current and shifting ideologies, and historical and political legacies" (Hinkel, 2005, p. 891), or, as James Paul Gee (2001) asserts: "all people have multiple identities connected not to their 'internal states' but to their performances in society" (p. 99). This research study will attempt to report on explorations across some of those social constructs.

In the field of composition studies, teachers and researches started examining writing processes as valid research sites to elucidate information on what and how students learn how to write in the early 1970s. By examining the process of students' writing, research focused on reflection and revision, among other aspects. Since the early 1990s, according to Beverly J. Moss & Keith Walters (1993), the field of composition studies "acknowledge[s] that there is no monolithic student; there are students who come to the classroom from various communities and bring with them much of the baggage … [and] their own discourse patterns, reflecting community values and world views (p. 436). This also relates to Ivanič's (1998) concept of "autobiographical self," (p. 24) which the author describes as the legacy that has been imprinted in an author based on what s/he has learned in her/his native language. Self-assessment activities in the current research study have been analyzed to elucidate information on whether and how students negotiated their multiple identities through writing by switching among "autobiographical" and "discoursal" selves.

In the field of L2 writing, identity issues have also been thoroughly explored. According to L2 scholars such as Tim McNamara, Bonny Norton, and Jett Hansen and Jun Liu, among many others, the notion of identity is central to language learning and has been extensively researched during the last few decades: (Canagarajah, 1993; Corson, 1993; Goldstein, 1996; Martin-Jones & Heller, 1996; Morgan, 1995/1996; Walsh, 1987). Paul Kei Matsuda has focused much of his research on ways in which L2 writers negotiate their identities. In his "'dynamic model' of second language writing, Matsuda asserts that second language writers' linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds influence students, but are not ultimately decisive, and may be negotiated, which is what the second part of this research purports to do: research ways in which students' various identities were negotiated through language. Following Matsuda's theory, I tried to observe whether students constructed and negotiated their identities in hybrid spaces, which according to Bronwyn Williams, "offer a potential way to work against and beyond the limits of the dominant discourse" (p. 604). To that purpose, I examined how these L2 writers talked about or practiced self-assessment

during the exit interview to reflect on how their home cultures, and educational backgrounds informed them as writers.

Furthermore, critical scholars such as Thomas Ricento (2005) researched "the ways in which identity is constituted through and by language, and how these processes occur within broader social discourses with their inscribed power relations," (p. 895) which resonates with Foucault's and Hall's argument that "identities are constructed within… discourses" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Ricento provided me with theoretical and practical tools to analyze the ways in which students negotiate their own identities and power through language in a writing classroom. According to scholars such as Ricento and Min Zhan Lu (1998), in a second language acquisition environment, not everything has to lead to assimilation and loss of personal identity.

Based on the aforementioned theorists' premises, language and identity cannot be understood as separate, independent categories; that idea has also been of crucial importance to my research as I have analyzed ways in which students negotiate their identities through language (self-assessment). Ricento's, Canagarajah's and other critical literacy scholars' theory of non-assimilation has also been essential to my research, as I have investigated how students could adopt new identity features without giving up their own, prior identities through the practice of self-assessment.

Research Methods

This section outlines a gap in our field and identifies the significance of the current study; then, it lists research questions that guide my study, and identifies and provides necessary information on research site and participants; finally, this section describes data utilized and methods of analysis that best fit this research project. This study is positioned within particular epistemologies drawn from composition studies, literacy studies, L2 writing, and cultural studies. Situatedness in this project also refers to the study being located in the writing classroom itself.

3.1 Gap

As it has been previously stated, not much research has been conducted on how self-assessment and reflection in L2 online writing contexts may lead to student negotiations. Part of helping students become better prepared to participate in global communication exchanges may expect students to become more participatory in their own learning. However, do we composition instructors in L2 writing contexts aid students to accomplish that purpose? Or do we hope they will simply imitate what we display in front of them? Are we providing students with spaces to negotiate power dynamics? At this point, we should be reminded of Min-Zhan Lu's (1990) words: "there are both personal and social reasons for contesting and changing the very discourse they are trying to master" (p. 20). Thus, students' rhetorical strategies to negotiate

multiple identities need to be examined to understand whether discourse norms are contested and students demand more power and/or various roles in the classroom.

To address that gap, the current study has analyzed two female students' reflection documents and exit interviews in which they are given an opportunity to assess their own work.

3.2. Research questions

The following research questions guided this project, which aimed to understand how two female L2 writers understood and practiced self-assessment

- What rhetorical strategies do those two L2 writers employ in self-assessment activities to negotiate identity traits?
- What rhetorical strategies do those L2 writers employ in self-assessment activities to negotiate prior knowledge?

3.3. Research site and participants

My research site was an L2 writing class, which is taught at the Communication Studies department, and is geared to foreign students, mostly from Eastern Europe, Middle East, Eastern Asia, and Latin America[*], who are either totally or partially pursuing an undergraduate degree at the chosen institution. However, neither in the semester in which I conducted a pilot study of this project nor in the subsequent semester were there any students from Eastern Europe.

For the past few years, most of the students come from the Middle East, Eastern Asia and also Latin American countries. Many of the students who come from China are part of what is called a 2-2 program in which students do their first two years in China and then they finish at the institution this research project is based on; those students are required to take an English class if they wish to be part of this exchange program. Most students who come from the Middle East are either from Kuwait or Saudi Arabia; both countries offer scholarships to students who want to pursue a Bachelor's degree in the U.S. They arrive in the U.S. to learn English and then continue with their majors. However, this institution in the U.S. Southwest was not ready to accommodate such student influx; thus, some Saudi students attended other colleges to meet the English requirement and then registered at that U.S. Southwest university to pursue their degrees. Many of the students from Mexico come from Northern states and are here because of the proximity between the two states.

Students are placed in this L2 writing class in three different ways. They take either a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); an International English Language Testing System (IELTS); or they go to an English Language Center (ELS) proprietary school, achieve a certain level and then are admitted to this institution as regular students. To be admitted in this university, these L2 learners must have 500

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[*] I obtained that information in one of the meetings with the instructor about a year ago.

points (paper-based) or 61 points (internet-based) in the TOEFL exam. The minimum score for IELTS is 5.5; Tracy could not remember what the requirements for ELS were because this institution does not receive many students through that venue.

Once these L2 students have taken an English test and obtained the admission score, they are required to take a placement exam. These students have to write an essay on a topic they do not know in advance. The instructors rating these tests assess whether these students can control grammar, have a rich vocabulary and a sense of paragraph structure. If the L2 students taking this test possess all the aforementioned traits, then they are placed in this L2 writing class. If, on the contrary, they incur in frequent grammar errors and in lack of comprehension of what a paragraph structure is, then they are placed in a lower L2 writing class, which does not contribute to students' degree progression. If L2 students are placed in the lower writing class, they try to strengthen their verbal and composition skills, and then they move to the higher level writing class, the one I have observed in this research project.

If these L2 students do not meet the minimum TOEFL requirements upon admission, they go to the intensive English program: beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. Once they complete the advanced level, then they have to take the same admissions exam that regularly admitted students take that has been detailed in the previous paragraph.

Undergraduate students who enroll in and pass this class immediately meet the requirement of freshman composition[*]; thus, this L2 writing class can be considered part of the general education requirements for international or 1.5 generation students[†] pursuing any degree, and is offered every semester. Typically, the department obtains funds for only between one or two groups each semester. At the beginning of fall 2010, I started observing both sections of the L2 writing class offered by Tracy because I was trying to decide which group would be closer to allowing purposeful selection based on my research goals. I was interested in investigating multiple identities in an L2 writing classroom, so choosing the morning group, which represented the most heterogeneous group in terms of cultural, linguistic and gender identities, seemed the right decision.

3.3.1. Research Participants

There were fourteen students registered in this class, but one dropped by mid-semester. Out of all the students, two had to go through the intensive English language program because they did not meet the required English score to be admitted as

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[*] Tracy has recently informed me that her department has restructured the L2 writing curriculum in order for it to be closer to the one offered in a freshman composition class. The rationale for those changes is that some 200-level composition instructors were complaining about the level of some L2 writers, so the English department is negotiating with the L2 writing instructors in order to decide whether the L2 writing class will be accepted as a pre-requisite of ENGL 200-level classes.

[†] Students who arrived in the US at a young age and completed their high school in this country.

regular students. This difference in linguistic ability may be because four out of the thirteen students had already lived in an English speaking country for a period of time that ranged from a month to one year.

The status of these students was rather heterogeneous as well. There were five freshman, five sophomore and three junior students. Tracy, the instructor, informed me that, ideally, this L2 writing class is taught to freshmen; however, due to the increasing influx of students -on the one hand- and funding cuts -on the other hand, many of these L2 students cannot register for this class during their first semester. Occasionally, some students also manage to "wiggle around in the system," and do not register for this class until they realize there is a hold in their account and cannot register for any upper-level courses. A final reason why there may be many sophomore students is because of the 2-2 program explained in the previous section.

Most of the students registered in this class were science majors (Information Systems, Electrical Engineering, Agronomy, Biology), which means they planned to take a Technical writing class in the following semester. Only three students planned transfer to an ENGL211 class; two were English majors and one student was majoring in Journalism.

3.4 Data Collected

For the purposes of the current paper, I have included data from two female students' reflection activities and their exit interviews as I wish to examine both rhetorical strategies those students utilized to comment on their understanding of self-assessment and on my interpretations of their work on the one hand; besides, I also want to explore how gender and home culture affect the participants' interpretations.

3.4.1. Documents

This part of the data is comprised of students' writing, namely various self-assessment activities and forms. The instructor developed three different sets of self-assessment activities for this class: A) a *reflection* activity, which asked students to reflect on what they had learned during the research project; B) eight self-assessment forms with a question that asked students to *comment* on instructor's comments to their work; and C) five *checklists*, which asked students to assess their own work against a rubric. For the purposes of this paper, only the *reflection* and *comment* are considered.

I read the aforementioned collected documents looking for phrases and utterances that signaled that students positioned themselves in different identity traits. Those phrases and utterances were then identified as rhetorical strategies students utilized to move from one identity to (an)other. I borrowed terminology from Speech Act Theory in general and John Searle's edited book in particular to name those strategies; namely, I have borrowed speech acts such as thanking, making statements and asking questions, inter alia. I also analyzed self-assessment forms and activities to elucidate patterns of identities and power negotiations. Those types of comments (or the lack of them) helped me to understand how students used and/or resisted certain aspects of

self-assessment, which also helped me to give ground to questions on specific choices during the interviews.

3.4.2. Interviews

Towards the end of the semester and once I had conducted a preliminary analysis of the self-assessment activities, I interviewed eight students enrolled in this class. I was looking for "*purposeful selection*" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88) in the choice of students. In this class, the number of students typically registered in any given semester is between 14 and 16. The number of students registered at the beginning of the semester was 14; however, one of them dropped the class toward mid-semester. Choosing eight participants was representative of the individuals involved in this class not only in terms of numbers, but also of country, languages spoken, linguistic ability, culture and gender. Being representative of a country does not mean I assumed they could speak for all the people in their home countries, but that they represented the percentage of students in the classroom from that same country.

There were three women in this class; two of them were from the same country and the three of them came from countries that are included in the geographically named Eastern Asia. I decided to interview two women, one from each country. They also represented two different languages and varying degrees of linguistic ability.
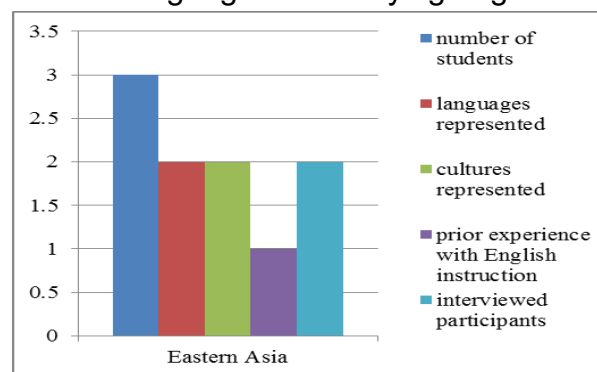

Figure 1: Female research participants' traits.

For the purpose of this paper, I have only included data from interviews with two female participants whom I have identified as Gentle and Aniksi as they were the only two participants who provided answers that could be categorized under the identity position of "student and cultural identity."

3.4.3. Research models

In this paper, I draw on research models that focus on speech act theory that help categorize students' rhetorical strategies while they used self-assessment during their individual interviews. I utilize Searle's, Kiefer, & Bierwisch (1980) theories to categorize students' speech acts during the exit interview. I utilize discourse analysis to understand how students reflect upon their own use of self-assessment via metalanguage; namely, I categorize rhetorical strategies utilized to move from one

identity, such as good student/writer, to another (e.g. resisting writer/student). In Searle's (1980) introduction to *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, he states "the minimal unit of human communication [is] the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating [among others]" (vii). Furthermore, some of Shuy's (1993) concepts, but, mostly, Nassaji & Cumming's (2000) language functions, such as "requesting clarification, thanking, evaluating, predicting, complaining, apologizing, and giving directives" (p. 102) have also been employed to categorize rhetorical strategies. Overall, of most relevance to the current study are the following rhetorical strategies: making statements, thanking, and asserting.

Results

Out of all the documents (*reflection*, *comment* and *checklists*), the *checklists* were the least rich in details pertaining to student identities negotiations because they only asked students to review their work based on a checklist of items the instructor deemed important; specifically, those documents asked students to verify the categories that they had included in their papers (See Appendix A part III for a checklist sample). Although there was no prompt for it, some students did take the opportunity to write some comments explaining their choices, which, to me, constitutes an instance of power negotiations. Out of all the documents, the richest one in instances of self-assessment and negotiations was the reflection type of self-assessment.

As I examined the aforementioned types of self-assessment, I realized that certain themes or identities kept repeating themselves. This paper reports on results in the category of "student and cultural identity" my interpretations are supported with data from both the self-assessment forms and exit interviews.

4.1 Student and Cultural Identity

As I was analyzing students' answers in their self-assessment activities, a theme emerged on how students' cultural identities affected how they understood and even practiced self-assessment. At times, they referred to their culture as what had shaped who they had become (what Ivanič would refer as 'autobiographical self'); besides, they also talked about cultural differences between their country of origin and the local context in the US. In this section, I will focus on culture in terms how students' home culture was important to them and how home cultural identity helped or constrained participation in certain activities.

4.1.1 Importance of home culture

A rhetorical strategy students used when inhabiting this identity was asserting. In Gentle's case, the powerful function of her home schooling literacy (O'Neil, 2007, p. 171) had affected how she viewed and evaluated self-assessment; for her, self-

assessment did not work because she was more used to memorizing and not to assessing her own work or even engaging in dialogue with her instructor. When I asked Gentle if she thought self-assessment activities had helped her become a better writer, she asserted "I think this kind of activities is not very useful for me because I am good at memorizing something, you know the students from my country, they are very good at memorizing something and then, because we have a training in this kind of activities many years in my country, so this kind is not very useful for me" (Gentle, personal communication, November 15, 2010). In Aniksi's case, on the contrary, her home schooling literacy was also very important, but –after two years in the US, she had adopted some of the new discourses and was quite happy with being more "talkative" and even asking questions and disagreeing.

In the exit interviews, while some of these L2 writers were talking about and practicing self-assessment, they often pointed out cultural differences not only in teacher-student relationships but also in learning methods. This category was very interesting because it shows L2 learners can show awareness of cultural differences and even talk about those differences. In some cases, these L2 writers' home culture and what they had learned there played a very important role not only in the "autobiographical self," but also in students' "discoursal self" and how they assessed themselves as writers based on those two different cultures.

As I asked both Aniksi and Gentle how they interpreted self-assessment, they both positioned themselves as students who were aware of cultural differences. For instance, Aniksi defined a student as someone who "[j]ust keep studying! (laughing). Yeah! Like, I don't know, everything just learning by heart and every time keep studying and studying. A little bit stressed. Especially in my country. But here a little bit relaxed" (Aniksi, personal communication, November 16, 2010). Her roots were so important for her that she was reflecting a cultural value she had learned about what it means to be a student, namely as someone who should memorize things. On the other hand, she was also very aware of differences between the educational systems in her home country and the U.S. and admitted that being a student in the U.S. was more relaxed than back home.

4.1.2 Cultural identity and its influence

These two students mentioned many times their home culture and how it differed very much from the local culture in the US setting. Gentle, for example, talked about her culture being an always present influence in everything she does and how she has learned to work in an entirely different way. Both Gentle and Aniksi defined their culture as one in which memorizing is valued and not much discussion or negotiation exists between instructors and students. Although these students do not originate from the same country, they seem to share several cultural values.

The influence of their home culture, though, was different for these two students. For Gentle, the *comment* type of self-assessment was a new activity, but she was able to see the difference between her home country and her local context in the U.S.: "I

think this kinds of activities can…in my country we one write something, the teacher told us to do something and we do something, but in this kind of activities, we should write, write some comment to the teacher." By asserting that in her definition of the *comment* type of activity, Gently is positioning herself as a student who is aware of cultural differences and of what would not work in her home culture.

In the interview, on the other hand, Aniksi also affirmed being highly influenced by her home schooling practices and literacies, but she had –as Bakhtin would point out- appropriated some of the authoritative discursive practices and made them her own after being in the US for about two years. Thus, this student saw value in self-assessment and asserted that she had already adopted some of those practices: "[H]ere it's more open, so I kind of like adapt that. And then we become more like that… I'm going to ask… and then I'll argue. Why is it like that? Ha ha ha" (Aniksi, personal communication, November 16, 2010).

Conclusions

The complexity of and, sometimes, even seemingly contradictory, responses these L2 writers provided was very interesting. As a researcher and an educator, it was fascinating for me to see how these L2 writers sometimes talked about themselves as being almost experts in their own writing. In spite of the fact that self-assessment and reflection may very well be Western concepts, it is also true that English has become a world language; consequently, many of the L2 writers who arrive to this institution in the U.S. Southwest are somehow familiarized with those two concepts as well as with some other academic literacy practices. On the other hand, as students participated more in certain discourses, namely self-assessment, they seemed more comfortable in the cultural and social expectations of that genre.

Consequently, using Bourdieu's concept of *tabula rasa,* I made meaning of these L2 writers' prior experiences and knowledge*.* I assert that students do not come to our classes as blank slates on which we can inscribe information; they already have certain knowledge that we, as composition instructors, should honor and respect. Besides, we should create spaces in which we help those students share that prior knowledge with their peers and their instructors. I believe it is in the creation of those spaces (third spaces, according to Homi Bhabha or Edward Soja) that we will be able to accomplish what educational settings that are informed by social constructionism purport to do, which is encouraging students to be more participatory in and responsible for their own learning. Self-assessment activities that promote reflection and spaces for negotiations could become those spaces.

The current research project has explored the ways in which L2 writers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds reflect and practice self-assessment without claiming that those students can talk for their entire cultures. In spite of drawbacks and potential risks, we should keep self-assessment in L2 classrooms, and also in L1 writing contexts, so we can accomplish what Hamp-Lyons & Kroll envisioned: "[w]ithin the field of education there is a groundswell of interest in

collaborative assessment and self-assessment. We hope to see these utilized in designing writing assessments for ESL students in academic contexts in the future" (p. 237). These authors' vision guides my recommendations for future teachers in L2 writing contexts when designing self-assessment activities as potential spaces in which L2 writers can engage in negotiations of identities and knowledge.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

A first limitation I would like to discuss pertains to how the current research project informs the field of L2 writing. I had hoped, at first, that these L2 writers' gender, and cultural identity traits would play important roles in how they used and talked about self-assessment. Out of the two interviewed female students, one showed more resistance to certain types of self-assessment and used silence as a rhetorical strategy; on the other hand, the other female student mostly positioned herself as a good student who thanked her instructor. Those are two examples of how gender helped or prevented identity negotiations in self-assessment. However, with the methods of data analysis employed in this project, I could not find enough evidence to claim that those identity traits were relevant. Further data analysis that uses different methods may illuminate those and other aspects that the current methods of data analysis did no help uncover.

Yet another limitation of this study was that I could not validate my research findings with the research participants. When I finished transcribing the research participants' interviews, I sent those back to the students in order for them to confirm that I had portrayed their words accurately. None of the students replied to me, which made think that any future efforts of contacting them would be futile. In order to address this limitation, I discussed my findings with a colleague to ensure that I was not trying to guide the data in certain directions.

Once I started a preliminary analysis of the data, I realized that the instructor had eliminated the self-assessment questions and substituted them with something else. When I contacted the instructor asking her if that was a mistake, she informed me that she had not thought about my project when she changed that question. She had just rephrased the reflective activity because most of her students in prior semesters did not seem to understand what she wanted them to do in that question. After our informal meeting, she decided to add an extra self-assessment activity: a reflection on research content. Besides, she informed me she was also willing to ask students to answer the original self-assessment question: "What did you learn from this assignment? What is still difficult?" for the preliminary and final drafts. In the end, that question was never asked and no students answered the *comment* type of self-assessment for assignments 6 and 7 (preliminary and final draft respectively). Reflecting back, I cannot help but think that those two self-assessments could have added valuable data especially because more complete drafts are usually the ones that allow for more reflection.

In conclusion, this research aimed at analyzing students' self-assessment activities, which, at times, were handwritten. I decided to keep students' examples as they had originally written them and not to change certain words even if they presented "differences." Influenced by Canagarajah's theories, I refuse to deem every single instance of "linguistic difference" presented in students' writing as an "error" ("Writing Pedagogy" 602), which is why I have avoided talking about students' mistakes. At times, though, if I thought my readers may not understand what a particular L2 writer was trying to say, I added an explanatory sentence interpreting their thoughts. For the most part, though, I believe these L2 writers communicated their negotiations very clearly through their rhetorical strategies even if their syntax or vocabulary choices were not what standard English may demand. After all, even if these L2 writers are trying to learn how to compose papers in academic English, their prior experiences writing whether in English or not already present them with the opportunity to negotiate between their prior knowledge and what is being taught to them. Additionally, if composition instructors design self-assessment activities that are informed by current theories and pedagogies, we may provide those L2 writers with incredible opportunities to continue negotiating not only their knowledge but their multiple identities and discourses.

Although conducting research with only one group seemed a suitable decision for the purpose of the current research project, it may also be interesting to include more groups taught by other instructors. The next sub-section outlines recommendations for the future. I provide recommendations not only for researchers who are also interested in understanding how L2 writers use self-assessment to engage in negotiations with their instructors, but also to L2 instructors who want to help their L2 writers navigate in the new educational context by providing spaces for them to reflect and self-assess their writing.

5. 1. Recommendations for Practice

Yancey's definition of reflection as the development of a "multi-selved identity" (*Reflection* 13) has guided my interpretation of these L2 writers' reflective practices. I strongly believe that students should be offered self-assessment activities that present them with opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and things they have struggled with and may even need improvement as a process of negotiating their identities as learners, and as citizens. Although there was not much written reflection in some of the self-assessment activities this particular instructor developed, I still think these self-assessment activities have proven successful in helping these L2 learners practice with various discourses, *reflection* and *comment* being but two examples. One possible alternative to address the lack of written reflection in some contexts is, as Peggy O'Neill asserted, to introduce those practices as part of teaching. Furthermore, L2 writing instructors in general could opt for including the *reflection* type of self-assessment again. Part of what some instructors, myself included, may wish to accomplish with their students is to help them realize that they are capable of talking

about themselves as writers and about their writing as well. That metacognitive ability may not surface in a semester, but –by practicing it repeatedly- a time may arrive when students can do it "naturally."

I would also like to address personal recommendations for the use of self-assessment in the future. These suggestions are based both on what I have observed and I believe in, but also –and probably more importantly- on what some of the L2 research participants have recommended. Much research in L2 Writing and Composition advocate for more student participation, but –in this class, as it may be the case with other L2 writing classes as well, the instructor was still faced with existing tensions in the field: accuracy versus fluency and process versus product, among others.

Both the fields of Composition and L2 Writing are in a moment in which writing as a process is valued; however, external pressure in assessing college students' writing may very well affect the dynamics of what and how composition instructors both in L1 and L2 teach. As a consequence, "the question of accuracy versus expression of ideas and knowledge will become more problematic for teachers and testers of second-language writing than it is at present" (Hamp-Lyons 345). However, if we start designing self-assessment activities that are grounded in sound theories, then we will create spaces in which L2 writers can reflect on their writing processes and issues they struggle with. Moreover, we will also teach those L2 writers that assessing their own work and learning processes is part of learning how to write in their new context. Then, as Huot stated, we will be claiming assessment back in our hands, both students' and instructors' hands, for, as Williamson also asserted, "assessment is an ongoing and integral part of teaching" (77).

In order to listen to students' voices in reflection through self-assessment, the *reflection* type of self-assessment should be incorporated into L2 writing classes and be used to present students with opportunities to talk about aspects of writing they have learned and aspects they still need to work on. Besides, students should have more opportunities in which they can engage in a dialogue with their instructor, and reflection, as practiced in self-assessment, presents students with much potential. I strongly believe we can help students become independent learners and attain a level of metacognition through such work with self-assessment. Granted, those are values that are important in Western cultures, but which may not be important in other parts of the world; however, learning how to assess one's own learning processes and work is an identity trait that could be extrapolated to other aspects of life, not only in their future careers at the local institution but also in the workplace.

Most importantly, I believe composition instructors should read students' self-assessment activities for what we can learn from them. If we truly value the potential self-assessment presents for students, then we can do something with those results; many composition instructors are overloaded with work and responsibilities, but we can still try to find some time to analyze the findings of our classroom research projects. Classroom research, formal or informal, may help writing instructors refine their theoretical and pedagogical practices. Thus, instructors could read students' self-

assessment activities to understand how our students interpret and use certain academic discourses, namely self-assessment. Such understanding could lead to changes in our curricula and classroom practices, which is aligned with theories of social constructivism, among others, in which students are expected to be agents of knowledge creation. Finally, negotiating activities and practices with our students through self-assessment also entails creating spaces in which power can be shared and/or reversed.

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APPENDIX A: SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

Name _____

Section No. _____   Date _____

SPCD 111G Fall 2010
Reflections on Research Content and Process

1. Please **summarize your research** below. Mention your **narrowed topic** and the **main points** that you explored through reading and writing.

2. Discuss what you learned about the **topic** that you found especially interesting.

3. Consider the following research steps. **How do you think you performed at each step**? What was especially **strong and effective about your work**?

    a. Selecting a **topic** and finding suitable **sources**: _____

    b. **Reading** and **annotating** the sources: _____

    c. Preparing **research cards**: _____

    d. Deciding on a **controlling idea** and the **main points** to develop in the paper (i.e., your thesis statement):

    e. **Writing your paper** after having done all the research work: ___

4. **Looking back at these steps, which ones** would you do **differently** if you could start again? **What exactly** would you **change**?

5. What did you find helpful as you did this research? Check **only what you used and found helpful**. Then **explain why** those resources were helpful.
    ___ Writing lab time during class. _____
    ___ The Writing Center consultations. _____
    ___ The textbook, *Writing Up Research*. _____
    ___ The reference book, A Writer's Reference. _____
    ___ Other. Please state what other resource you used. _____

COMMENT

<u>**Include the following in your folder the following items**</u>: These complete Research Assignment Sheets filled out to this point.

Instructor's Evaluation: _____ up to 10 points (meets or exceeds requirements)

____ below 7 points (needs energetic revision to meet requirements; <u>see instructor</u>)

_____

_____

Comment on your instructor's evaluation. What questions or concerns do you have? (<u>Your response is required</u>.)

_____

_____

APPENDIX A_PART II: **CHECKLIST**
    RESEARCH PROJECT CHECKLIST FOR WRITING A One-Page Summary of the Source
CONTENT AND FORMAT
_____   Your research folder is complete with all 4 sources and a sufficient set of notecards and a bibliography card for each.

_____   Your name (first and last), course number and section, and date are in the upper right hand corner.

_____   The title is *Summary*. It is centered on the page.
_____   Your summary is *one page*, *typed*, *double-spaced* (or 1.5 spacing), *one-inch margins*, and *11- or 12-point font.*
_____   Paragraphs are indented in the style used in the U. S.

_____   You wrote an overview of the *whole article or whole book excerpt*, not just the first page or two.
_____   You explained the authors' purpose for writing the piece.

_____   You stated what type of source you have. Is it an article, a book chapter, or a document from an Internet source?

_____   *If you are summarizing a research article*, you focused on the original contributions that the authors made.

_____   You do not include your own observations or evaluations in the summary.

DOCUMENTATION Next, you acknowledge (cite) your sources.
_____   You have presented the main points of the source by paraphrasing (restating information in your own words).
_____   You begin your summary by acknowledging the authors in sentence no. 1 or 2 of your summary.
_____   You cite the authors at least two other times in the paper. (Use any of the three types of APA in-text citations.)
_____   You quote rarely (not more than once in a 1-page summary) and only when it is appropriate.
_____   *If you quote,* you include the following: (1) verbatim text, (2) quotation marks, (3) authors' names, (4) page no.
_____   *If you need to cite an author which your source cites*, use the secondary source citation format.
_____   You include a reference in APA style at the end of the summary. (It should be on page 1. Do not have a second page.)
_____   If your source is from the electronic data base, you have included retrieval date and database name.

EDITING
_____   Every sentence is punctuated correctly (no comma splices or fragments).
_____   Verbs are correct (e.g., verbs agree with subjects; auxiliaries such as BE, HAVE, DO are used if
        needed).
_____   Countable nouns have articles or are in plural form.
_____   Spelling is correct.
_____   Your writing is formal (e.g., no contractions, 1st and 2nd person pronouns, phrasal verbs, informal words, or proverbs.)

APPENDIX B: List of interview questions:

1.2. C: LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Can you describe how you see yourself as a student and as a writer?
2) Are there are aspects of your identity that are important to you when you're in the classroom?

3) In the field of composition studies, self-assessment has been conceptualized as any activity that asks for students to reflect upon and write about their own writing and learning (linked to Donald Schön's concept "reflection-in-action"). Other scholars refer to self-assessment as a "heuristics [in that it] helps students to establish a habit of critical inquiry that is active rather than passive, to integrate the learning into what is already known, and to project what more can or should be learned" (Smith and Yancey 170-71). Yet, to others, self-assessment indicates a dialogue "about student learning between student and teacher, student and adviser, and perhaps even student and larger institution" (Kusnic and Finley 7). I understand and will conceptualize self-assessment in my research as instances in which students reflect on their own learning processes and writing products, and write about those positioning themselves as active creators and negotiators of knowledge rather than passive receptors. In this research study, I will investigate both more "formal" self-assessments (checklists and questions) and informal self-assessment activities as they occur in the classroom (e.g. students are asked to check their work against certain criteria provided by instructor). Thinking of those definitions, what would you
call that? How have you used it during this semester to look at their writing? Had you used that before this class? Talk about that experience briefly.

4) Could you outline the various types of self-assessment you have practiced this semester?

5) I'm interested in knowing how you used self-assessment and, in particular, whether it helped you negotiate between instructor's expectations and your own expectations for that assignment. Based on that: How has the checklist type of self-assessment provided spaces for negotiation? How have other types of self-assessment helped?

6) How do you think self-assessment has helped you to talk to your instructor about your knowledge (both prior and recently acquired)?

7) How has reflection through self-assessment helped you negotiate among your various identities? How have you evolved throughout this semester?