

The use of a case study approach to examine the construction of identity in an undergraduate dissertation written in a foreign language

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Abstract

My study reports on a case study of a Spanish native speaker's academic writing in English regarding his identity expression. I use Ivanic's (1998) framework on writer's 'discoursal identity'. I also included the writer's mini-autobiography and a semi-structured Skype-interview for an in-depth analysis of the writer's authorial representation and autobiographical self. This triangulation of data shed light on the writer's identity construction. I therefore also reflect on the use of a case study approach when analysing a writer's 'identity construction'.

Key Terms Case Study, Identity, Undergraduate Academic Writing

1. Introduction

The study of the self in social and academic contexts is a current issue in studies on identity. However, identity has different conceptualisations and can be approached from different perspectives. Its study has usually been approached either from an 'individualistic view' (Taylor, 1989), i.e. the essence, unique of each individual having a personal story; a 'social view' (Harris 1997), i.e. the individual's expression of the self using language constructed according to (a) social context(s); or a 'personal-social view' i.e. the expression of the self socially constructed but based on individual choices (Prior, 2001; Ivanic 1998; Benwell & Stokoe 2006). In a recent interview (March 22, 2012), Ivanic notes that many researchers tend to take a socio-cultural perspective on language without paying attention to the individuality of the 'self' as for them everything is socially constructed; however, she stresses that "every individual brings something different from their own experience even though the experience in itself has been socially constructed". I certainly believe in the self-representation of the person in his/her writing as being shaped by social practice. That is, as I

write this paper, I am representing myself while following the social-academic conventions of this academic community; my individuality is being (re)shaped and constructed by the academic practices I am involved in. Thus, I am confident that approaching identity as a personal-social construction will provide a portrait of the writer's discursive construction in an academic context.

Identity, as understood in this paper, then, is the expression of the self in interpersonal relations; it involves an understanding of the self and relationship(s) as in part socially constructed, then expressed in the particular manifestations of a particular genre and in a particular social context (Ivanic, 1998). The analysis of the writer's identity in terms of 'self representation' is encompassed in four dimensions: *autobiographical self*, *discursive self*, *self as author*, and (possibilities for) *self-hood* (Ivanic, 1998) (see section 2.2). Academic identity may be part of someone's multiple (fluctuating) identities. In their search for academic identity, writers need to master *academic literacy skills* as well as the *academic writing skills* outlined by the institutional conventions in relation to the particular genre they write in (Clark and Ivanic, 1997). To have a deep understanding of the writer's self-representation in an academic context, I consider pertinent to approach its analysis with a case study approach. Thus, the value of the present study lies in the outcomes of the methodology used and the depth of the study itself.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my paper is to illustrate the value of using a case study approach to examine the construction of identity in the literature review and methodology chapters of an undergraduate dissertation written in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

For the purpose of my study it is important to first understand how a case study works in analysing a writer's identity. The depth of the study can point to unrevealed non-apparent

identity features in academic undergraduate writing which can be later explored in detail in the same context or in other contexts by researchers interested in the area of academic writing, identity and a case study approach in relation to writing identity.

For a clear understanding of the situation and purposes of the present study, I divide the paper into four major sections. The first section presents a theoretical account of case study research aligned to studies in academic writing research. It closes with a summary of a case study devoted to the analysis of identity. In the second section, I briefly describe my case study and the data collection methods. Section three discusses the results as well as possible limitations. In part four, I conclude with a reflection on the method, its usefulness for analysing a writer's identity construction and pointing to implications for case studies in this area.

2. The Notions of 'Case Study' and 'Case'

Case study research has been referred to as a research tradition (Creswell, 2007), a method (Dörnyei, 2007), a methodology (Johansson, 2003), a research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Yin, 2003), and an approach (Creswell, 2007; Casanave, 2010a), and is usually placed in the field of qualitative inquiry (Silverman 2005; Stake 1995, 2003). I first explain my own understanding of what 'case study' is. In this respect, I share Casanave's (2010a) ideas. She convincingly dismisses the notions of 'method' and 'merely qualitative inquiry' on the grounds that many methods – both quantitative and qualitative – can be used in conducting a 'case study'; she then, suggests that a 'case study' "more accurately refers to a research *tradition* [italics in original] or an approach in which the object of inquiry is unique (in the sense of singular) and bounded and in which the researcher's interest is in the particular rather than in the general" (p.66). In sum, 'case study' is an approach to study an entity with clear defined boundaries (case and context are delimited and delineated).

2.1. Case Studies in Writing and Academic Writing Research

Approaching writing as part of literacy practices and with the aim of exploring textual identity(ies) in computer mediated communication, Lam (2000) presents a case study research looking at the internet literacy practices of a non-native English speaker. Her purpose in using ‘case study’ was to expand and suggest alternative visions of literacy development by probing deeply into one case and using ethnographic and textual analysis. By analysing electronic textual experiences, she concludes that identity(ies) is a social and generated construction of the self(selves) in social media network as the writer creates his/her identity in that media.

Case studies have been used to approach diverse concerns of academic writing (Tardy & Matsuda, 2009; Roca de Larios, et al., 1999; Casanave, 2010b). In relation to identity, Walkó (2009) illustrates the use of case study approach in combination with text analysis. She shows how case study and textual analysis can be combined to inquire into the writer’s self-representation in the contexts they research. On the one hand, she uses case study principles to gain insights into the perceptions of two undergraduate teacher trainees in their research contexts looking at them from three angles: their ‘classroom practices’, ‘research’, and thesis ‘writing’. On the other hand, she uses Van Leeuwen’s (1995, 1996) framework to carry out the textual analysis. Her chapter vividly illustrates how these two ways of inquiring can work together to explore the writers’ choices in terms of ‘voice(s)’, and subject ‘positioning(s)’ in their writing.

2.2. Identity as Self Representation

As noted above, identity has become a key construct in the social sciences as in writing (Block, 2009). Prior (2001) suggests that identity as a construct has had three ‘moments’, the individual, social, and individual-social. However, as Ivanic (2012) claims,

nowadays attention is still mostly given to the social. Indeed, Walkó, despite (apparently) considering both the individual and the social aspects of identity, devotes more attention to the social by using Van Leeuwen's (1995) social action model and exploring the participants in their researcher, teacher trainee and writer identities. Her study has shown how a case study or studies can be combined with textual analysis to explore identity in undergraduate writing. It is now my turn to see how useful case study can be when considering writer's identity as *self-representation*.

To begin with, I shall first clarify my understanding of identity in terms of 'self representation'. In 'self-representation' (or 'discoursal self' as it is named by Ivanic (2012)), "the writer has to deal with the interface between what they bring themselves and what the culture offers them and they make the unique choice". In other words, the individuality of the writer is present in the choices he/she makes when writing which are shaped by the social practice being carried out (e.g. the writing of a dissertation).

Addressing this individual-social view of writing, Ivanic (1998) presents her 'discoursal self' framework, which, as mentioned, encompasses four dimensions: autobiographical, discoursal, self as author and possibilities for self-hood. Autobiographical self is "associated with the writer's sense of their roots (...) the way of representing [writer's] experiences" (*ibid.* p. 24) in their writing which is socially and discursively constructed and in a process of continuous change. The discoursal self, refers to "the impression – often multiple, sometimes contradictory - which [writers] consciously or unconsciously convey of themsel[ves] in a particular written text" (p.25). It relates to the author's voice in the sense of how they want to sound and the image they project. 'Self as author' concerns the writer's voice as well, but in "the sense of the writer's position, opinions and beliefs" (p.26). It refers to how the author claims or rejects their authority in the text and establishes their presence.

Lastly, the concept ‘possibilities for self-hood’ is “concerned with prototypical possibilities for self-hood (...): ‘social’ identities” (p. 27) which depend on any institutional context, and in a way we can claim these are the impersonal possibilities for the individual since they depend on the social (discourse community). These four dimensions of identity are summarised in the framework proposed by Ivanic and Camps (2001), which points to linguistic realisations for carrying textual analysis. This framework (Figure 1 below) also corresponds to the three language functions proposed by Halliday (1994), *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual*.

TYPES OF POSITIONING	IN RELATION TO	LINGUISTIC REALISATIONS
Ideational positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •different interests, objects of study, methodologies; •different stances towards topics: values, beliefs and preferences; •different views of knowledge-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Lexical choice in noun phrases. (i) classificatory lexis, (ii) generic reference, (iii) evaluative lexis, (iv) syntactic choice. (i) verb tense, (ii) verb type, (iii) reference to human agency, (iv) generic or specific reference, (v) first person reference.
Interpersonal positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different degrees of self-assurance and certainty; • different power relationships between the writer and the reader. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) evaluation, (ii) modality, (iii) first person reference. (i) mood, (ii) first person reference.
Textual positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • different views of how a written text should be constructed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) noun phrase length, (ii) mono- vs. multisyllabic words, (iii) linking devices, (iv) semiotic mode.

Figure 1: Three Simultaneous Types of Subject Positioning

Because I assume the reader is familiar with Halliday’s terminology and approach, I shall explain the three types of positioning only briefly. The ideational positioning of

language “is concerned with representing: talking or writing about something” (Ivanic & Camps, 2001:11). The interpersonal positioning relates to the interaction between the writer and the reader, while the textual positioning refers to the construction of the text: “making the meanings hang together” (Ivanic, 1998:40). As the figure shows, the ‘discoursal’ construction of a writer’s identity can be realised linguistically in a variety of ways. It is, however, worth mentioning that although this framework has been criticized and questioned for assuming a profoundly social view of identity (Atkinson, 2001), it provides “a theoretical basis and some practical tools for doing [...] discourse analysis related to [identity] and self representation on student texts” (p.116).

Constructing a writer’s identity in a Foreign Language (FL) context is a challenging task. As pointed out by Schoonen et al. (2003) and Kroll (1990), writing academically in a FL is a complex process due to the fact that writers need to master L2 communicative competence as well as respect academic writing conventions. Since thesis writing is seen as one of the most challenging tasks which integrates content knowledge, academic writing, researching skills, and the arguments of the writer to express their position (Bunton, 2005; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006), a thesis is an ideal piece of writing for analysing the expression of the student’s identity. For this particular work, I worked only with the *literature review* and *methodology* chapters of the undergraduate dissertation. I chose these chapters as their communicative purposes have different functions, and ideally, the methodology emerges out of the literature review. That is, the Literature Review is meant to justify the value of the research and show what is documented in the literature (Kwan, 2006) whereas the Methodology chapter aims to describe the data identification, selection, delimitation, collection, and analytical framework adopted in the research (Nwogu, 1997). These chapters then differ from each other in the sense that one deals with the existent literature while the

other with the rationale for a whole range of decisions of the study in the particular research context of the researcher.

3. The Case of an Undergraduate EFL Writer: Methodology

To analyse the writer's 'discoursal' identity in depth, I devote special attention to the study of a case: a dissertation³¹ written by a Mexican EFL undergraduate writer. Below I describe the case and the methods used for data collection and analysis.

3.1. The Case

Ian (pseudonym) is a 24-year-old male from a rural area from the North of Puebla State. He moved to the city pursuing his BA degree in EFL and TESOL/AL at a public University in central Mexico. He is a second generation to complete a BA degree, i.e. his mother (and brother) hold BA degrees as well. He has a GPA of 8.96 and did not have to defend his dissertation³²; however, defending his dissertation was actually something he wanted to experience after the long process of writing it.

For further background as regards Ian's 'autobiographical self', it is relevant to note that his decision to study languages was taken because he succeeded in his pre-university English courses, and he claims that the value of knowing languages is that it enables him to understand different views of reality. Despite his unsuccessful childhood earliest literacy practices (understood in this context as the learning to read and write) in Spanish, he recognises his early adolescence literacy practices in English to be rewarding. His autobiography reveals that the transition between his unsuccessful practices to satisfactory ones occurred because of the vast reading of literature (in Spanish) and the listening of music (English). His love for literature and music in English made him change his feelings towards

³¹ The Mexican context uses the word 'thesis' for undergraduate level, yet as I am writing in the European context, I am referring to it as a 'dissertation'.

³² Students with a GPA of 8.5 or above and having not failed nor re-taken any subject can graduate by writing, but not defending a dissertation; if one of these two requirements is not fulfilled, the student must write *and* defend the dissertation.

writing. Currently, when it comes to writing academically, he claims he prefers to do it in English. In fact, writing his dissertation in English was a major source of motivation for him. His research topic was on exploring perceptions of literature by university students; a topic which already reveals something of his 'autobiographical self'. Ian demonstrated to be a strong student in his BA studies; in his viva, he indeed received recognition for his research and writing.

3.2. Data Collection

This case is taken from my larger, doctoral study. The data collection involved Ian sending me the electronic file of his dissertation, writing a 'mini writer autobiography/ and being interviewed by skype. Ian sent me his dissertation at the same time as the instructions for writing the autobiography (Appendix A) were sent to him; after a one-month-period, we scheduled the interview time. I sent him the interview questions (Appendix B) and a day later the interview took place.

I approach the discursual construction analysis of his dissertation using the framework of Ivanic and Camps (2001) described above. This framework details the linguistic realizations of Ivanic's (1998) initial framework for the discursual self analysis where *manifest intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity* are also considered. The mini-autobiography and interview complemented the analysis. Below I discuss these three sources of data in terms of self-representation.

3.3. Limitations of the Study

Although the methods used in my 'case study', i.e. textual analysis, an interview and a mini-autobiography, provided a comprehensive picture of the case, I am aware of their limitations. I discussed Ivanic and Camps' (2001) framework for the textual analysis, yet a

more thorough description of the other two is needed. Here I just point to their most obvious and discussed strengths/limitations.

For mini-autobiographies (which in this case, interestingly, Ian wrote in Spanish), personal ‘voice’ is valorised (MacLure, 2003), yet because it implies retrospection of the writer’s early literacy practices, what the participant remembers and/or chooses to recognise as relevant is subjective. Retrospection also applies in the case of the interview; both the interview and autobiography were recently written, and as it has been four years since the ‘case’ went through his viva, his impressions might not be as strong or clear as they once were.

The interview I carried out falls into the category of ‘semi-structured online interview’. Skype proved to be a useful research tool here (Booth, 2008), yet there are economic costs in purchasing the software to record the interview and/or a secondary recording device. A second limitation could be the stilted character of the on-line interaction compared to face-to-face conversation.

4. Findings

In the discursual analysis (*ideational positioning*) of Ian’s dissertation, Ian positions himself as a knower of his topic (literature) and research methodology (descriptive). This is noted in the familiarity with which he chose his lexis within his research topic in the dissertation itself, e.g. *literature, genre, text, knowledge, schemata, survey, Likert*, and evaluative lexis and/or statements such as this in his literature review chapter.

“[t]he main issue with the word “literature” is that people in a way is “scared” by the word “literature” due to the fact that they consider that literature is only in the scope of intellectuals but that is not true (...)”

The overall impression of Ian's writing is that he wants to show his knowledge. He expresses no modesty in hiding his views and his competence when writing. This was confirmed in his autobiography when he evaluates himself as a *competent* writer, but acknowledges not being a *good* writer. However, the analysis of the chapters' linguistic realisations (*interpersonal positioning*) show that he is more a 'knowledge teller' than a contributor to the field, that is, his writing is more expository than argumentative, which is probably expected in the literature and review methods. The degree of certainty and assurance is midlevel, that is, he just points to, but does not make strong claims. This has some implications for the study of 'voice' – a component of identity which refers to the expression of the self – at undergraduate level in the sense of 'authoritativeness'. Stapleton (2002) claims that undergraduate writing has no expression of 'voice'. Nonetheless, Ian's expression of 'self as author' in terms of self-representation (as conceptualised in this study) is evident in the way he incorporates his world view, culture and experiences within the topic of literature.

It then seems that Ian's most 'personal' identity characteristics are exposed in his writing without any concern; yet the 'possibilities for self-hood' seemed to be limited for him. Features of academic writing, such as impersonal writing, genre and institutional conventions, e.g. dissertation layout, seem to have had a negative effect on his dissertation since it was structured in a very conventional way. This is, though, the impression I got from the dissertation, knowing the dissertation genre conventions and knowing the institutional requirements³³. To really appreciate whether these conventions put constraints on Ian's identity expression, I addressed the issue in an interview with him. He claimed to be in total agreement with the writing being impersonal, since he considers the dissertation as a formal

³³ I am a member of the academic staff in the former's university. The structure of a dissertation in this context is pre-established by the institution. Students just satisfy the requirements.

piece of work, and academic conventions as rules which allow him to enter the academic community. Indeed, the textual analysis points him to be a well established member of his academic community. At this point, I must refer to Casanave's (2010b) observation: a case study can entail personal involvement between the researcher and the participant(s), so Ian's interview responses might have been influenced by his perception of my expectations and convictions regarding academic writing (as a member of academia). When dealing with the genre conventions, despite Ian's overall satisfaction with his work, he expressed some non-conformity in his literature review structure. He felt the need of including more theoretical concepts than the ones he did. In the interview, then, he mainly points to a rather excluding/including and reorganization of relevant concepts in his literature review.

In the light of these findings, it is thus challenging to include in addition to a study of his dissertation as a genre where the surface organisation and text structure (Swales, 1990) are considered, individual factors such as lexis, linguistic patterns, rhetorical choices that reflect and construct the writer's identity. Hence, analysing identity in thesis writing may reveal the interface between what the individual brings from his/her own, i.e. his personal choices and his/her choices made from what is permissible in this genre (understood as the conventions –academic and institutional - of an undergraduate dissertation).

4.1. Implications of my Case Study for EFL Writing

As reported above, it seems that this EFL undergraduate has positioned himself as an established member of his academic community. Carrying out an in-depth study of his case has shown how his EFL discursive identity is constructed in this particular institution. The 'case' has pointed to the strengths and weaknesses of his study programme regarding academic writing practices. Certainly, the programme appears to be strong in providing students with ways of positioning themselves as knowledge makers; however, an evaluation

of the conventions is needed so that the students can empower themselves through their writing by making their own choices of organisation among other choices. I signal this as a call for attention to the institutional instances, yet considering the ‘representativeness’ of the ‘case study’ of a ‘case’, I also point to the need to analyse more ‘cases’ in order to test the wider applicability of these formulations. If these findings are evidenced with more dissertations, then major considerations regarding the writing of undergraduate dissertations in this context could take place which can benefit not only this particular institution but also other possible institutions which share similar characteristics of EFL contexts and undergraduate dissertations writing.

5. Conclusions and Reflections on the Usefulness of Case Study for Analysing Identity

I close this paper with reflection on Stake’s (1995) words:

“the in-depth study of cases helps illuminate the situated nature of learning to read and write, and the complexity of individual persons and the practices of literacy. It holds the potential to destabilise conceptual boundaries and contribute to new understandings of the concepts under study”.

This quote addresses my research question regarding the usefulness of case study to investigate identity in writing. Indeed, as my study shows, the in-depth character of ‘case study’ in analysing EFL writer’s identity sheds light on the particularities of the ‘case’ under study. The achievements of ‘case study’ in researching identity is the exploration and description of how a writer develops his/her writing discoursal self, paying attention to its four dimensions approached from different angles. The study has certainly challenged the analysis of the boundaries between thesis genre, academic writing and identity. However, something that case studies in identity need to achieve is ‘objectivity’, in this particular study in the sense of achieving the targeted communicative function of the dissertation despite the

individual characteristics of the writer. On the one hand, the objectivity of the framework(s) and the interpretations i.e. determining how a particular linguistic item should or not be placed in any of the positioning must be ensured with clarity; secondly, the personal relationship between the researcher and the participant (i.e. the 'case') might create some bias.

Certainly case studies permit the in-depth analysis of a 'case', the textual analysis carried out on one dissertation (i.e. case), despite being time-consuming, was manageable considering that I only looked at two chapters of the text. Textual analysis and case study can be perfectly combined; however, their combination may not be the most convenient when for purposes of representativeness the study is a collective case (several cases) type. The length of the dissertation as a target text, the complexity of identity analysis as self representation and the inclusion of several dissertations may suggest that case study is not the most suitable methodology and/or may need supplementary methods such as corpus linguistics. Hence, case studies may be best seen as only *part* of the much larger enterprise of researching identity.

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Appendix A: Writer Mini-Autobiography

Writer Mini-Autobiography

Write the story of your development as a writer - in both your native and second or foreign language(s). Consider your entire life, including pre-school years, and do not limit yourself to school experiences. Below are some areas of your experience to consider:

- People who influenced your writing
- Memories of successes and failures in writing
- Your feelings about writing (whether a particular text e.g. essay, thesis, is easy or difficult for you to write and why)
- Your strengths and weaknesses in writing

You need **not** write about all of these areas nor follow this order in your account. The purpose of thinking about these topics is to help you recover and arrange relevant memories.

Although the task asks you to focus on your writing history, you feel free to include certain experiences that relate indirectly to writing but provide a context for those experiences.

Before you start to write, think about the basic action of your 'story' and the events you want to include, the people you want to talk about in your text, and the *setting* (the place your story is located in). And finally, an autobiography becomes more interesting if you can show tensions; old vs. new writing practices, changing points of view, or interpersonal differences, e.g. family, school.

Feel free to choose the language of your preference.

Appendix B: Interview with the Participant (case)

The purpose of this interview is to gather information about the participant's perceptions regarding his identity particularly in the writing of his undergraduate dissertation.

I. General Questions: writing of his thesis

- 1 What was your thesis topic?
- 2 Why did you choose this thesis topic?
- 3 Do you think you are personally invested in your research area/ topic? If so, how or in what way?
- 4 What was the most difficult challenge that you faced when writing your thesis? Why?
- 5 How do you feel about the fact that you had to write the thesis in English?
- 6 Do you think writing your thesis project helped you to develop your academic writing? If so, how?
- 7 Do you think writing made you grow professionally? If so, how?
- 8 Do you think your thesis reflects a part of yourself? If so, which, or which ones? Why do you think so?
- 9 Do you consciously and intentionally use any particular language strategy to express your own personality in your academic writing?
- 10 Do you include your point of view in your academic writing? How often? Is there any particular chapter of the thesis in which you feel you do this more than any other? If so, how? If you do not include your point of view in your academic writing, why not?
- 11 Do you feel any limitation when expressing yourself in your academic writing? If so, what sort?
- 12 During your studies in general did you ever feel you couldn't include your point of view while respecting academic writing rules? If so, do you remember when it happened? Why did you decide to do?

Questions regarding writing in general

- 13 What do you consider are your weaknesses/strengths in academic writing?
- 14 In your writing, do you write in *impersonal/first person/ third person –they?*, Why did you do so? Were you aware of what you were doing here?

- 15 Your thesis is mostly written in an impersonal way, for example what was found in the studies. Did you have any special reason for doing so? How did you feel about it? Are you happy with that kind of writing?
- 16 How do you feel about the use of passive voice in your writing, for example: two instruments were used... instead of **I** used two instruments...?
- 17 Are you satisfied with your thesis?
- 18 Which was the easiest chapter for you to write? Why?
- 19 Which was the most difficult chapter for you to write? Why?