

Multiplex Aspects in the Construction of Academic Writer Identity among ESL Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT

Research in academic writing initially focuses on the output of writing, but it is now increasingly turned to writer identity. This article analyses how the acceptance of self as academic writers is difficult. The acceptance of self as an academic writer is quite complex, especially for first-year doctoral students who must engage with the demands of academic language in an academic context. Research acknowledges that self-acceptance as academic writers come with many implications and doctoral students are often hesitant to describe themselves as academic writers. This article seeks to address this complexity through empirical research focused on self-perception in the construction of an academic writer identity. This study involved ten first-year ESL doctoral students in the field of education at an established Malaysian institution. From the findings of this study, we identify four aspects that they experienced in becoming academic writers: creator, interpreter, communicator and academic presenter. These four aspects are experienced in different ways by each participant, illustrated by narratives of their life history and writing practice. In particular, it is hoped that this article can provide some pedagogical implications for the teaching of academic writing in institutes of higher education and offer a lens through which researchers and teachers of writing can further explore academic writer identity.

Keywords: Academic writer identity; academic writing; ESL doctoral students; life history; writing practice

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on academic writing has increasingly turned its attention to writer identity construction (Burke, 2011) and the concept of writer identity has become particularly important over the last decade (Cremin & Locke, 2016; Hyland, 2010; Ivanic, 2005; Matsuda, 2015). Writers' identity is said to be a person's relationship to his or her social world and consists of an inner sense of themselves that provide continuity over time. This means that *who we are* and *who we might be* is a continuous reconstructing process. From here, we can see that identity is constantly changing, and such a process of identity construction capture the potential complexity that writers face in the writing process. Taking into consideration the aspects of fluidity, identity construction indicates adjustments that perhaps imply changes in self-perception as a writer in an academic context. Writer identity, therefore, helps characterise both what makes us similar to and different from others. In the case of academics, it refers to how they establish credibility as members of a particular academic community, and reputations as individuals. Consistent with this view, the notion of writer identity has become one of the key

elements of successful academic writing by which writer can offer their interpretation and argument in written discourse (Hyland, 2002, 2011, 2015; Ivanic & Camps, 2001).

As Hyland (2019) noted, writing for academic purposes is often challenging. First-year ESL doctoral students could face more challenges in this academic writing process as they need to develop second-language proficiency in writing, familiarise themselves with the institutional and disciplinary writing conventions while negotiating a representation of self, that is intended to create a particular writer identity. Given the challenges scholarly writing entails, writing in these circumstances while constructing their writer identity, therefore is a demanding academic activity. Accordingly, academic writing is one of the social practices that academics do most, through communicating, publishing, and contributing their knowledge. Traditionally, the output of writing has been viewed as the only lens to see the construction of writer identity, with the image that writers' identity is constructed only by the linguistic aspects of discourse in which a writer engages while producing texts. However, this study is not limited to this conventional view of writer identity in written expression but sees the construction of writer identity as a process to produce the final writing product.

According to Ivanic (1998), writing is influenced by writers' life histories and writing practices. In this sense, both life histories and writing practices are central to the process of constructing identity as academic writers. Drawing from Ivanic's notion of life history, each doctoral writer has its own unique set of life histories, experiences and practices. This means when these writers enter a new social context; they carry their life histories, experiences and practices into their new experiences in education. Essentially, as they perceive each new experience, these doctoral students will continually engage in the process of negotiating a new identity (Hyland, 2012a, 2012b; Ivanic and Camps, 2001). Part of this negotiation process is due to the doctoral students' uncertainty as to whether their values and prior practices align with those of the academy. This is related to Ivanic and Camps' (2001) work on voice as self-representation in writing. Here, self-representation in writing vary according to the way doctoral students perceived themselves. The sense of self as an academic writer is related to the whole person, and the life lived (Clark & Ivanic, 2013).

While there is a body of literature on the nature of academic writing, writer identity and writing pedagogy involving first language (L1), second language (L2) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, there has been little empirical research focused on emergent academic writers such as first-year English as a second language (ESL) doctoral students (Alotaibi, 2019; Dobakhti & Hassan, 2017; Musa, Hussin & Ho, 2019; Hyland, 2015). In addition to this, past research on writer identity has been investigated and limited to written production. Hunston and Thompson (2000) and others have introduced varied linguistic resources such as attitude (Halliday, 1994), epistemic modality (Hyland, 1998), appraisal (Martin, 2000; White, 2003), stance (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Hyland, 1999), and metadiscourse (Crismore, 1989; Hyland & Tse, 2004). Although these studies have extended our understanding on the role of linguistic resources play in academic texts, there is still a scarcity of research that investigates the construction of a writers' identity as a process to produce the final written text. In other words, previous research on writer identity in academic writing has expanded our knowledge of how writers interact and represent themselves textually using linguistic resources. Yet, it is unclear what it means to be an academic writer.

To a certain degree, despite a growing literature documenting academic writing, there is still relatively little about how first-year ESL doctoral students negotiate a representation of self in academic writing within the doctorate, and the process of constructing an academic writer identity remain fuzzy. In response, the authors of this article are called upon, as researchers and teachers of writing to further resource discussion on academic writers, construction of academic writer identity in the academic writing process within the doctorate, self-representation in writing, and provision of academic writing development. The aim of this

article is therefore to report some key findings of research which looked at the construction of academic writer identity as a process among first-year ESL doctoral students, thus focusing on the individual's sense of themselves as an academic writer. The study also attempts to tease out what does it mean to be an academic writer and whether the paths of becoming an academic writer can be neatly divided into a beginning, middle, and end. The research question guided this study is: What does it mean to be an academic writer among first-year ESL doctoral students?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study draws on Ivanic and Camps' (2001) subject positioning construct of 'ideational identity' to understand how the writer position or see themselves as academic writers. Ideational identity refers to the writer's voice as culture, a social and individual identity, which is part of a person's self-conception and perception (Ivanic & Camps, 2001). Being an academic writer is demanding and ever-changing because individuality is constructed based on their values, experiences and practices (Ivanic, 1998, 2005). Hyland (2012a, 2012b) and other researchers (Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic and Camps, 2001) further noted that the writers' experiences are bound up with the whole sense of self or self-identity. Ideational identity thus captures the dynamic self and other tension by emphasising one's life history, experience and writing practice on one end, and individuality on the other (Ferguson, 2009; Smith, 2013). These are especially significant to the construction of academic writer identity among first-year ESL doctoral students because they enter into new academic communities that required what may be unfamiliar academic writing practices in line with expectations of their supervisors (Hyland, 2002). The activity of writing in the academic context may receive the acknowledgement as an 'academic writer'. However, Hyland (2002) noted that this view where writers' identity as an academic writer is constructed in writing oversimplifies a more complex picture. This is because the construction of writer identity is not solely found in writing. Instead, it is constructed through a process of negotiation that involves spoken interaction between the doctoral student and their supervisors in the academic disciplines. Therefore, being an academic writer proposes an identity to others as well as self-perception which may be projected in a text (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Clegg, 2008; Dobakhti & Hassan, 2017). The complexity of an academic writer identity is never in a state of fixity. This is because they constantly evolve with different factors and perceptions and function as a wheel that transfers interactionally produced self-identities (Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Lillis, 2001; Ostman, 2013). These theoretical perspectives point to the value of exploring the perceptions and experiences of writers' identity as an academic writer over time. Our interest is in writers who show a level of commitment and potential in their work but are not yet known or established as academic writers. This is due to our assumptions that first-year ESL doctoral students aspiring to undertake doctorate level research may face equal or more difficulties in writing their doctoral research proposal.

METHODOLOGY

THE STUDY

The data reported in this article come from a two-semester qualitative study of first-year ESL doctoral students' writer identity construction related to the development or changes in writing over time (Lo, Othman, & Lim, 2020). For this article, the data reported focused on the

participants' perception of self as academic writers and their writing practices during the writing time of their doctoral research proposal. An interpretative approach was used in this study involving ten first-year doctoral students across four areas of study in the field of education at an established Malaysian institution. With this, it allows a variety in the level of commitment, experience, and expectation in constructing an academic writer identity among different individuals. Interviews were employed to understand the participants' individual experiences and to suggest useful explanations or interpretations of collected qualitative data. The data for this article was drawn from two phases. The first phase involved in-depth interviews with the first four participants (pseudonyms used), namely Johari, Ela, Joanne and Min Ho. The interviews data were collected from their first to the last month of their two-semester conditional enrolment period. These interviews focused on their life history and writing practices. The basis of this semi-structured interview questions includes writing practices, interest in writing, thoughts of writing and views of themselves as a writer. These interviews elicited how events, practices and experiences first influence the participants' self-perception as a writer and then construct their self-identity in writing as academic writers from which we elicited four aspects of being an academic writer. In other words, these four new aspects proposed to focus on the process which extends beyond written product perspectives to see the construction of an academic writer identity. This study reveals the lived experiences of first-year ESL doctoral students that are at the stage of writing their doctoral research proposal which could perhaps inform a relatively unreflective performance of identity in their writing expression, but illuminate a record of what happens in the process leading to their final written research proposal. The second phase was undertaken with the second six participants to test the four aspects amongst a larger group of individuals within the same faculty to maintain a basis of comparison between participants in the same field of study. This test followed the same methodological procedure as the first phase, as described above, but their interview data were collected approximately one month after the completion of the first phase. Data were analysed using inductive coding that revealed the areas of significant influence on participants' self-perception as a writer. The details of data analysis used for the study reported in this article will be further discussed in the data analysis section.

INTERVIEWS

For the study reported in this article, a total of four in-depth interviews with three follow-up interviews approximately one month apart was conducted. In this case, three in-depth interviews with two follow-ups in the first phase, and one in-depth interview with one follow-up in the second phase. These in-depth interviews allowed the interviewer to understand deeper with the participants, and gain a broader understanding of the participants' self-identity as academic writers than focus group interviews. Follow-up interviews were conducted to provide additional confirmation to the interviews and also allowed the four participants to affirm the four aspects of being an academic writer. The participants were invited to look at and to make sense of their own stories and experiences as an academic writer. More specifically, the goal of conducting the follow-up interview in the second phase was to refine and weigh the reliability of the four aspects identified in the first phase. Interview questions were scripted in advance of the interviews in a semi-structured form (Seidman, 2006) and additional questions were generated spontaneously based on the responses of the interviewees. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted 50 minutes to one hour.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Fifteen first-year doctoral students who were at the stage of preparing their research proposal in the field of education from one institution were invited to participate, and ten participants agreed. These ten participants who were writing in different fields of educational research were selected purposefully to allow for the representation of the different doctoral students' self-perception as a writer in the field of education. All of the participants were selected based on availability and strictly voluntary. Nevertheless, there was a specific intent to select ESL writers and first-year doctoral students because, in an ESL learning context, first-year doctoral students are newcomers in their selected field of studies and face more challenges in the L2 academic writing process as they are required to write in a second language, in which many of them may not be fully proficient (Matsuda, Saenkun, & Accardi, 2013). However, the participants' age and background experiences were not a determinant for selection. This heterogeneous mixture of ages, experiences and writing practices provided a variety in the participants. This means that the data would represent more than a chance of similarities stemming from life history and writing practice. Among the ten participants, the first four core participants whose dialogues are illustrated in this article were all in their first year of doctoral study who had registered in 2019 and in the process of writing their research proposal. Both Johari and Joanne were in their late 30s, and they had been teaching in national school as an English teacher for more than ten years. Ela who is in her early 30s was an English teacher at an international school before becoming a lecturer while Min Ho (mid-30s) was a school counsellor before becoming a private university counsellor. The other six were peripheral participants. All were in their early 40s and at the stage of preparing their doctoral research proposal writing, but either registered in 2017 or 2018.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the analytical process, the interviews were transcribed immediately after the interview sessions, read multiple times and coded with different colours. The different colours aimed at clearly realising all of the relevant information to illustrate the argument for this study which is to inquire into what does it mean to be an academic writer. The study also often use language from the transcript itself to name codes and note emerging patterns across this large data set. Examples of these initial codes included *aspire to do better*, *multiple experiences*, *relay on personal encounter*, *voice out*, and *exhaustion*. These initial codes were then brought together to seek relationships between the codes. Axial codes were then formed and organised to correspond *within control*, *a sense of purpose*, *engagement with readers*, *life choices*, and *external thoughts of regret and exhaustion* that corresponded with the four key categories identified in axial coding process included *creator*, *interpreter*, *communicator* and *academic presenter* (see Appendix A for a more detailed list of codes).

ETHICS

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university, and the study was undertaken within the Research and Governance Framework of that institution. Within the study itself, a face-to-face verbal explanation for participants was accompanied by written information with the opportunity to raise further questions and concerns. The process of obtaining participants' consent prior to the collection of data consists of (i) adequately inform about the research study, (ii) give an appropriate time (in this case: one day up to one week) to comprehend the information, (iii) offer freedom of choice to participate or decline, (iv) explain on their rights

to withdraw from the study at any time, and (v) highlight the ethical practices for privacy, anonymity and confidentiality while collecting, analysing and reporting data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides insights into both the participants' paths of becoming an academic writer and an inquiry into what does it mean to be an academic writer. The findings in this study shed light on the construction of self-identity as an academic writer by highlighting the participants' perception of self and their writing practice from the theme cluster that derive from that search within those interview transcripts. The presentation of findings is mainly focused on the first four participants in phase one. When participants described their journey to the work they produced as a doctoral student, all of them noted that they struggle to position themselves as academic writers: 'while improving my work, I am still searching for that' (Johari); 'it is a process that I need to go through and explore on my own' (Ela); 'I am still finding the steps required to figure this out' (Min Ho); 'I am still trying to walk out from this maze to find myself' (Joanne). Interestingly, when the term 'voice' was mentioned in the interview, the participants echoed the word to describe experiences and struggles in constructing their identity as academic writers. For example: 'for me, voice is me, I really feel that having a strong voice in thesis writing is important but I still find it challenging' (Min Ho). Like Min Ho, most of the participants felt that voice is a part of their identity as an academic writer and also a way of how their presence is presented for their readers in writing while only one of the participants felt that it is disconnected with their sense of self: 'I think our voice in writing is what we need to present and it can have nothing to do with our experiences or what we believe and practice' (Johari).

In the follow-up interviews, all participants saw academic writer as a term that fits someone active in publishing or at least completed their doctoral study: 'I think our professors in universities are academic writers' (Johari); 'I think our lecturer with doctorate degree and someone who is active in publication in this university is worthy to be described as an academic writer' (Min Ho). In both excerpts, Johari and Min Ho clearly states their opinion and view the academic writer as someone who ought to hold a formal job title at an institution that they can use it with legitimacy. Johari also pointed out that academic writer is someone who has earned their full professorship while Min Ho sees someone who have at least acquired their doctorate and actively engage in research and publishing. However, there seem to be more to it than this: 'for me, it's not just about writing every day. It's being dedicated to writing and constantly produce writing that is worthy even if it means you need to go through the cycle of drafting, revising and reviewing over and over again' (Ela); 'I think it is not about having your books placed on your table at the beginning of each day and you write, then put away those books and your laptop at the end of the day, having the thought of [...] okay, I'm done here' (Joanne). For Ela, the term academic writer may suggest more than accomplishing daily writing checklist. It is perhaps a matter of intellectual lifestyle and everyday practice of reading and writing. Then, in response to Joanne's comment, she expressed confidence that being an academic writer is not about routine; it is about how you live your life. She also emphasises that it does not end at the end of the day, and it is beyond the books and laptop placed on the table. To Joanne, the construction of identity as an academic writer may come through increase commitment to the practice of writing.

It is also interesting to note that the description of self as an 'academic writer' seemed slightly more complicated because all ten participants were not writing in their first language. This could be due to various reasons such as their pre-assumed expectation of becoming one and to accept themselves as second language users. When asked if they see themselves as an

academic writer, all the participants in this study hesitated and found it difficult with ascribing the term ‘academic writer’ to themselves. The barriers apparent to the participants in accepting that term include association with proficiency in both speaking and writing in academic English, consistent publication, ability to write creatively or have a set of a particular practice of reading and writing that are beyond the classroom teaching and learning. Then, in exploring the complexity of being an academic writer, all participants in the education field see the construction of identity as an academic writer in a non-linear progression. These contribute to the emergence of participants’ sense of self and reflect the multiple aspects of constructing identity as an academic writer. The multiplex aspects are illustrated in Figure 1 below, and each aspect in this preliminary model: creator, interpreter, communicator and academic presenter will be discussed in the following sections.

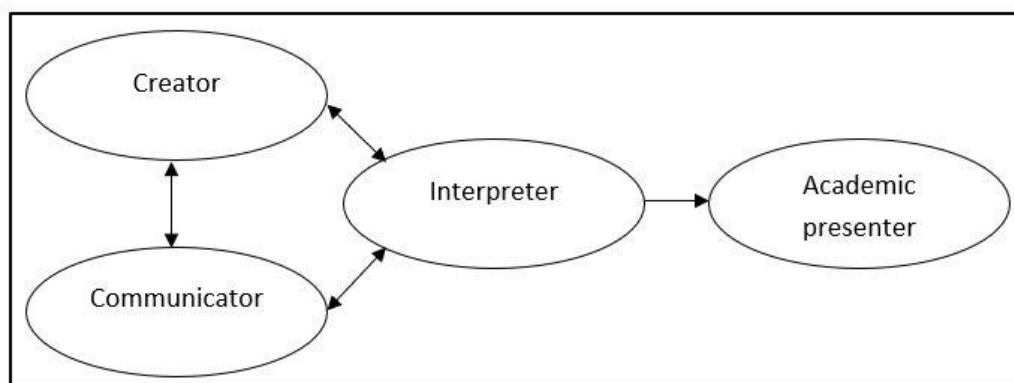


FIGURE 1. Multiplex aspects of academic writer identity construction

Figure 1 displays the preliminary model of multiplex aspects of academic writer identity construction. The four aspects are indicated by the circles with arrows linking the aspects. The arrows reflect the directions of how the participants live through the aspects. The double-headed arrows represent the non-linear progression of becoming an academic writer which shows multiple ways of becoming an academic writer. Then, the single-headed arrow linking interpreter and academic presenter indicates that academic presenter is the final aspect the participants experience in constructing their identity as academic writers. However, it is important to stress that the academic presenter aspect might influence the interpreter aspect, but this is not reflected by these nine out of ten participants. This preliminary model has important implications for understanding the process of constructing identity as an academic writer, particularly for individual who are not writing in their first language. It should be emphasised that these four aspects are not roles, but they are more about how the identity of an academic writer is perceived by the self and other.

CREATOR

Findings show that the creator aspect is about exploring ideas rather than writing about knowledge, which also means finding time to write and engage in the process of meaning-making. Without the time and space to explore and engage in the process of meaning-making, there is no creation. To be more specific, the creative work requires a deep investment of self where one has the desire to reclaim, to derive confidence in and to construct one’s voice by challenging the homogeneity of academic writing. In other words, this process of exploring ideas and understanding texts written by others as part of the creator aspect includes how writers formulate and organise their thinking before bringing these set of disparate ideas together into their writing. As a result, this creator aspect suggests that writers’ dynamic self-

perception is bound up with their engagement with self during the creation process which later influences their sense of self as a writer (Hyland, 2015). Hence, the creator is essential for any sense of self-identity as an academic writer. The term ‘creator’ provides a direct association from the verb ‘to create’. The following reflects how the participants’ responses give rise to this aspect: ‘this is where it all begins for me. This part makes me feel in control, and the best part is the feeling of being able to voice out my own opinion of how I see it in my context’ (Johari). Johari’s responses suggest that he is willing to challenge perspectives and values that are not relevant to his context and exercise his rights in writing by voicing out his mind. Hyland (2011) and Ivanic & Camps (2001) observed that creator is also where the writers’ voice may be evident as they served as resources in terms of their background, experiences and practices: ‘to elaborate further in writing, sometimes I rely on my personal encounter’ (Min Ho); ‘it is not just about the conventions or getting the key point right, it’s about experimenting ideas and understanding why it is contoured differently in our contexts’ (Joanne). Min Ho’s comment forms the impression that writers’ voice is influenced by their life history, experiences and writing practice in a particular context. He also believes that a degree of self-representation will be reflected in writers’ ability to create in the sense of crafting textual practice. It made sense then, that individualised voice is important in writing (Hyland, 2012a; 2012b). It is also worth noting that to Joanne, forming original ideas is much more than just putting words into sentences or writing after planning and outlining. Instead, it is about taking that one step forward without anyone looking in writing as a way of finding out. These participants’ perceptions also suggest that the creator aspect is different from the other three aspects because it requires us to recognise our individuality (Hyland, 2012a, 2012b) and put it forward openly in writing within an appropriate context.

INTERPRETER

The interpreter aspect concerns the ability to write relevant and logical arguments with evidence in a given context. These competencies included the ability to bring the vision into reality by reflecting the deep-seated impact of writing on writers’ life history. Here, life history refers to the writers’ sense of roots, of where they are coming from, and the knowledge that they carry with them to writing. It includes a description of an event as part of their life history. In this case, it is how each of the participants lives through by observing and reviewing their life choices and experiences before taking a more nuanced position interpreting. This means, the writers’ thinking evolves, respond to and draw upon their interpretation to further their thinking about the ideas that they have invested earlier on in the creator aspect. To such a degree, ‘interpreter’ reflects how writers make a connection between ideas and support their arguments with evidence, to their disciplinary cultures (Hyland, 2011). The following examples reflects how each of the participants’ comments gives rise to this aspect: ‘it helps me to frame almost everything I do’ (Johari) and ‘to be able to see the world in different shades’ (Ela). These comments suggest that interpreter involves intellectual curiosity, and the willingness and ability to learn new things. Often, this curiosity requires having an open mind, as well as flexibility and adaptability to re-evaluate propositions and to look at a subject from various points of perspective. If, as referred to above, this aspect is likely to be where participants find it challenging to identify interpretation and criticism, in the writing of others and their thinking before positioning themselves in writing: ‘it is some sort of experiential for me as I understand myself better at many levels’ (Joanne) and; ‘such circumstances that happened beyond my control shaped my life purpose’ (Min Ho). Reflecting on Joanne and Min Ho’s comment, it is also possible that their lack of curiosity about their research work and the intellectual inflexibility shown by them to adopt the expected academic identity delayed their construction of an academic writer identity. As Ivanic (1998) points out, writing is influenced

by our life history and writing practices. Thus, it is unavoidable that for some, this intellectual flexibility and willingness to learn had been deep-rooted while for others, it was a recent construction. This aspect complements ‘creator’ in reinforcing the writers’ evolving sense of self over time whereby their own experiences of living through, observed or heard about construct their self-identity as an academic writer. This aspect is also where the writers’ voice as an active influencer may be evident when they confront issues directly by appealing to the reader and acknowledge the certainty of their statements (Hyland, 2012a; 2012b).

COMMUNICATOR

The communicator aspect is about expressing ideas in a non-formal context. For instance, discussing an idea with friends and supervisors. This act of communicating is crucial for relaying information and often involves careful choice of words, organisation and rhetorical structure, and cohesive composition of a sentence in written form. This includes the ability to anticipate the needs and expectations of their readers to their texts. Thus, ‘communicator’ reflects an engagement between the writer and the reader by bringing in the writer-reader role relations (Hyland, 2018). The following reflects how the participants’ responses give rise to this aspect: ‘I used certain words in a certain way to not only convey my message but also to persuade my readers’ (Min Ho) and ‘I also need to practice writing academically more frequent and revise my writing to make sure the message is clear before I share with readers in my field but I get numb sometimes where I don’t see any mistake or flaws’ (Johari). The above comments suggest that communicator involves authentic emotional commitment and investment in the work requiring a sense of the reader’s expectations from the participants. Johari’s comment also seemed to imply that being a communicator means writing with more thoughts and always edit multiple times to achieve clarity. In addition, it is believed that as this aspect become established practice, it has an increasing impact on and interaction with the other aspects and the participants’ purpose or intentionality to texts or readers. This aspect also appears to be where participants find it daunting to achieve communicative purposes within a particular context: ‘I can draw upon my prior knowledge in a familiar context with non-specific audience but to write it academically in particular context with specific linguistic audience, I am not sure how and I find it tough’ (Ela) and sometimes insecure: ‘I have write like this during my master degree time but now, there are times where I feel indecisive’ (Joanne). In response to Ela’s comment, her identity construction as academic writers have been hindered by her inadequate engagement with readers and writing practice in her chosen field. Like Ela, Joanne had a prior experience where she has written research proposal before in her Master degree. However, Joanne was confronted with the sudden transition to being a doctoral student now and to no longer able to write and communicate her intended message in her doctorate research proposal. Part of this inability to write and communicate in her doctoral research proposal is due to the change of readership. Thus, she may feel a compelling need to search for her voice and her identity as an academic writer by learning the current knowledge of genre and style of writing at doctorate level because prior knowledge with texts may be superficial, particularly remembered, or conflicting in given contexts (Hyland, 2012a; 2012b).

ACADEMIC PRESENTER

The academic presenter aspect focusses on the participants’ ability to present their written communication within a research community in a formal context. For instance, presenting a conference paper or publishing an article. Hence, an academic presenter can be linked with publication and seen as a complement to the communicator aspect as it requires communication

competence to first present ideas in organised writing that involves countless action of drafting, revising and reviewing in the writing process. Thus, ‘academic presenter’ represents the participants’ identity as an academic writer by presenting information formally with coherence amongst peers in the academic communities through their academic writing. It can be explicitly influential as Johari noted that ‘I need to work harder’ as a result of presenting his work in his areas of study. Johari’s comment seems to indicate that academic presenter involves personal investment in researching and active engagement in literacy activities such as reading and writing academically. This is perhaps because an academic presenter is required to convey specific content in a particular academic context to meet the specific audience needs, instead of a general topic for a neutral audience. For others, this aspect of presenting information to a specific audience who is often the experts in a specific field of study may also require courage: ‘to dare to think and try to publish an article in my areas of study was something huge for me’ (Johari) and sometimes it causes dilemma: ‘there are times where I question my choices about the publication of whether I should emphasise on the higher rank journal with experts in my field or any publication will do’ (Ela). Upon close examinations of these responses, these examples of comments can be seen as powerful construction for expressing self-evaluative meanings of becoming an academic presenter. While questioning one’s choice of journal publication is an important criterion for selecting a relevant platform to match one’s research areas or topics, Johari and Ela’s comments nevertheless leave us in no doubt of their attitude in these examples, fronting their self-perception with a strong personal evaluation. Here, the sense of self portrayed by both Johari and Ela appears to concur with the normalising rejection in the academic publishing industry. In other words, critical self-doubt may be part and parcel of being an academic presenter, an individual who is keen on developing their crafts and thrive to construct academic writers’ identity. The reality of such choices may go to the heart of how the writers perceive themselves, whether seeking to express their competency: ‘If I can publish in high-rank journal which is what the lecturers does, then I think I am somewhat able’ (Min Ho) or to shape their sense of purpose by establishing a relationship with their readers through their work: ‘when someone response to my work, that inspire me to do better’ (Joanne).

THE FOUR ASPECTS: NON-LINEAR PROGRESSION

While none of the participants in this study sees the construction of academic writer identity in a linear progression, the pathway that led to the construction of academic writer identity varied considerably. This was evident in the narratives of their life history and writing practice: ‘for me, I start with discussing my research ideas with my friends and supervisors’ (Johari); ‘I start with an idea, then I try to make sense of it before sharing with my supervisors. Then, how I can research about it in writing but they are only drafts’ (Ela); ‘I think I need to figure out how to present my ideas before talking to my supervisors. Then, I start drafting and edit and once all done, then only I can publish’ (Min Ho). These comments not only revealed that every participants’ journey is different, but also identified some common aspects for the construction of identity as academic writers. For some, the focus was placed more on exploration, the creator aspect; for others readership and publication, the academic presenter aspect, and for some the emphasis was on on-going activity in a non-formal context, the communicator aspect.

The most typical trajectory reflected by the ten participants in constructing an academic writer identity was creator → interpreter → communicator → academic presenter. This may be due to the requirement that participants must explore their research interest and topic while making sense of their ideas in writing at the initial stage of research proposal writing. Although this creator and interpreter aspect is generally a personal one, there is still a need to for the participants to discuss their research with someone in the academic disciplines such as their supervisors. This aspect is also where participants present their ideas in writing while

adopting an appropriate identity. The commitment and investment in adopting an appropriate identity boost the self-identity as the participant present their work in a formal context. On the contrary, the unusual trajectory was communicator → creator → interpreter → academic presenter. This unusual trajectory, however, does not mean less significant or incorrect. This is because each participant experienced a change in their sense of themselves as academic writers differently. With this said, there is no formula for emergent academic writers, but it has to be noted that all the participants' narratives give rise to the academic presenter aspect last. It is understood that without any of these three aspects: creator, interpreter and communicator, it is quite impossible for one's narrative thread to give rise to academic presenter aspect in the first place.

Hence, the varied trajectories demonstrate that the construction of academic writer identity is multi-layered, and each participants' journey in becoming an academic writer is heterogenous. The findings also showed that the envisioning and reality of becoming an academic writer involves multiplex aspects involving the assumptions, possibilities, art of producing words and the way we look at and being in the world in relation to the contexts of one's life history, experience and writing practice. The significance of this for a study concerned with the construction of the participants' sense of self as an academic writer, as Hyland (2012b) observes, every act of communication is an act of identity, and in this case, it's where the participant make sense of themselves and their experiences through narratives and does it in writing. With this said, it is important to note that although the narratives in this study that draw on these first-year ESL doctoral students' lived experiences may not be directly communicated in their written expression, these experiences reflected that a lot had happened throughout the writing process leading to their final written research proposal. More importantly, this study shed light on new understandings to consider which is the process of constructing an academic writer identity among first-year ESL doctoral students who were at the stage of writing their doctoral research proposal.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study seeks to offer a fresh understanding of the experiences of writers' identity as an academic writer over time. Research with writers' identity in academic context also reveals the challenges relating to confidence, originality and the value of a strong self-identity (Clark & Ivanic, 2013; Hyland, 2002; 2012a; 2012b; Ivanic, 1998; Smith, 2013). Therefore, recognition of the multiplex aspects of academic writer identity construction could increase the awareness among writers who had shown a level of commitment and potential in their work but not yet established, and thus improving their competencies to cope with this complexity. This could include consideration of how academic writers' might position themselves and articulate their voice in their work. Educators could also benefit from this knowledge regarding students' beliefs about their writing by carefully designed and produced sustained responsive and responsible pedagogies that support struggling writers like first-year doctoral students. The old methods of 'correct and return' may not be working these days and perhaps it can be replaced by approaches that take into account our students' complex histories as writers, their backgrounds and the nature of written academic language.

This research relating to doctoral students' life history and writing practice as well as their sense of self as an academic writer offers new windows on the construction of academic writer identity in the context of the doctoral research supervisor and supervisee relationships. Though these relationships were not explored in this article in detail, the findings of the study were in line with the theories which point to the role play by a significant other at critical junctions in an individual's development. This research is situated in the experience of first-

year doctoral students rather than perceptions of established and successful individuals which often form the basis of such theories. As such, there is potential to explore further the ideas presented here, and this thought may also support our reflective teaching and learning practice on how our writers like doctoral students are supported in the research supervision process and academic writing courses. We hope this work may be appropriate in such contexts to address what constitutes being an academic writer and how the multiplex aspects of academic writer identity construction might actively be acknowledged and developed thus challenging the assumptions on how far such research supervision process and academic writing courses are aiming to produce academic writers or writing that is worthy.

To conclude, this research addressed specific questions about how writers' self-identities evolve and construct their academic writer identity in the academic context. As noted by Clark and Ivanic (2013), writing is affected by writers' life histories and a sense of their self. Such a notion asserts that the more we understand these life histories as they relate to the participants' backgrounds as writers, the better we are able to construct their identity as academic writers. It is for this reason that life histories remained an indispensable element for writers because life histories shape the sense of self and construct their presentation of self in writing (Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001). The depth and clarity of the experiences shared by our reflective participants resulted in us being able to offer a different way of identifying and describing different aspects of academic writers' identities: creator, interpreter, communicator and academic presenter. This is about the individuality of an 'academic writer' in all its complexity, the doing and being within the life history, writing practice and experiences of someone's life. Here, it is clear that these four aspects of being academic writers are elicited with reference to the context of ESL first-year doctoral students in Malaysia. However, these four aspects can also be very relevant to other doctoral students, particularly to those writing English as a second language. Finally, we suggest future studies examine the writer identities complexities against the perceptions of emergent academic writers representing second language writers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their comments on the earlier version of this article.

FUNDING

This work was conducted with the financial support (UM. TNC2/IPPP/81/10/1) provided by the Institute of Research Management & Monitoring, University of Malaya.

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APPENDIX A. LIST OF CODES

Open codes	Description	Examples	Axial codes
Voice out	Seeing writing as a site of expression vs. realising doctoral writing as a site of learning	Johari: the best part is the feeling of being able to voice out my own opinion into writing where there is no one there to tell me what needs to be written	Creator
Exhaustion	Frustration with research and writing process Finding it difficult to balance between inspiration and aspiration	Ela: sometimes, I just feel like crying because it's like I'm climbing Batu Caves over and over again which is extremely taxing	
Exploration in writing	Lack of motivation and willingness to revise drafts of writing	Joanne: it is not just about convention or getting the key points right. It's about experimenting ideas and understanding why it is contoured differently in our contexts.	
Relay on personal encounter	Not sure of the writing purpose, audience, tone and content	Min Ho: sometimes, I relay on my personal encounter	
Form logical analysis	Talking about writing sound discussion and interpretation	Johari: it helps me to frame almost everything I do	Interpreter
Reasoning	Reaffirm or challenge the ideas through writing	Ela: to be able to see the world in different shades	
Re-expression	Make discoveries within the field of study	Joanne: it is some sort of experiential for me as I understand myself better at many levels	
Multiple experiences	Talking about research and writing experiences (PhD thesis and article writing)	Min Ho: such circumstances that happened beyond my control shaped my life purpose	
Student choice as writer	Value of choice in writing	Johari: to evolve my readers' emotion	Communicator
Prior knowledge	Not recognising the target audience in academic writing	Ela: I can draw upon my prior knowledge in familiar context with non-specific audience	
Uncertainty	Not sure of the direction of the writing	Joanne: there are times where I feel indecisive when I approach texts with new contexts	
Language use	Lack of academic writing knowledge Unfamiliarity with academic language usage	Min Ho: I used certain words in a certain way to not only convey my message but also to persuade my readers	
Courage	Interested to pursue an academic career	Johari: to dare to think and try to publish an article in my areas of study was something huge for me	Academic presenter
Risk taking	Talking about the choices of journal publication in their field of study	Ela: there are times when I question my choices about the publication of whether I should emphasise on higher rank journal with experts in my field or any publication will do	
Aspire to do better	Becoming members of the academic community	Joanne: when someone response to my work, that aspire me to do better	
Confidence	Gaining confidence in their writing practices	Min Ho: If I can publish in high-rank journal which is what my lecturers does, then I think I am somewhat able	