Writer Identity Construction in EFL Doctoral Thesis Writing

Daping Wu [a]
wudaping@uoh.edu.cn
School of Foreign Languages, Institute of Social Technology,
Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand

Adcharawan Buripakdi
Adcharawan@sut.ac.th
School of Foreign Languages, Institute of Social Technology,
Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Research on EFL doctoral thesis writing is booming. The literature indicates a link between doctoral thesis writing and identity formation. Despite the call for scholarly attention on doctoral thesis writers, writers of doctoral theses in English as a Foreign language (EFL) settings have not been well represented in the previous studies. Moreover, although writer identity has been proposed as consisting of four aspects, most of the research has mainly adopted a corpus approach to discuss the discoursal self or authorial identity. To bridge these gaps, this study explored how multicultural writers at a university in Thailand constructed identity through EFL doctoral thesis writing and how their multiple aspects of writer identity interplayed. With the data triangulated from a questionnaire, written narratives, and semi-structured interviews, the study revealed that 1) multiple identities are developed through writers' self-adjustment and social acculturation; 2) passive alignment to institutional conventions leads to an actual distancing from discoursal construction of writer identity; 3) self-marginalization as EFL learners, negative external voices, and the role of student writer most hinder the development and representation of the authorial self. The research recommends EFL learners should be explicitly informed of the notions of constructing an authorial voice in the writing of doctoral theses.

Keywords: writer identity; identity construction; EFL doctoral thesis writing; novice writer; non-native English-speaking context

INTRODUCTION

Identity is not an optional but an integral part of the act of writing (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Matsuda, 2015); writing indicates every single feature of the writer's complex identity (Ivanič, 1998). In recent decades, literature on EFL Writing has highlighted the significance of identity construction in academic writing development (Hyland, 2015; Hyland & Tse, 2012; Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 1997; Matsuda, 2015; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Mora, 2017; Xu & Zhang, 2019). In academic discourse, individuals learn to participate in the academic community, and a key part of this socialization process is to perform one's identity as a writer (Olmos Lopez, 2015). Researchers have proposed that writer identity is a valuable tool in contributing to the quality of writing for writers from different cultures (Javdan, 2014; Matsuda, 2001; Mora, 2017), and thus should be an essential component of L2 writing pedagogy (Olmos Lopez, 2015).

Previous research has conceptualized writer identity within the socially available resources of self-expression. Lexical, syntactic, semantic, visual, and material resources are

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utilized to construct writer identity (Ivanič, 1998; Starfield, 2007). Certain linguistic features are proposed as signals of authorial presence, reflecting writers' discoursal construction of authoritativeness. Self-mention is also found to play an essential role in writer identity development (Kuo, 1999; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Some scholars suggest that novice writers should use first-person pronouns and the active voice to display academic writer identity clearly and powerfully, and thus gain readers' acceptance of their ideas. The use of the third person and the passive voice potentially reduces the writer's agency, leading to an unequal power relationship between the writers and their readers (Fairclough, 2003). Furthermore, other resources, such as evaluating the existing literature (John, 2012) and strongly asserting or arguing (Roux, Mora, & Trejo, 2011; Zhang & Pramoolsook), can also display authorial identity in written texts.

Social aspects are taken into consideration when exploring identity in written texts. The writers' backgrounds, especially concerning English language proficiency, home cultural backgrounds, and exposure to the notions of authorial identity, impact on EFL writer identity construction. For example, low English language proficiency hinders Chinese students' confidence in self-identifying as writers (Yang, 2006). Scholarly attention on the culturally loaded influence from writers' mother tongues shows that Asian students have difficulties in reasoning in their encounter with Western epidemiological assumptions (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Influenced by their first-language literacy experience, EFL students are not confident to claim authoritativeness (Hyland, 2002). To adjust oneself to create a new identity in the text(s), EFL writers develop strategies such as avoidance, accommodation, opposition/resistance, transposition, and appropriation (Canagarajah, 2003).

The literature review indicates a link between doctoral thesis writing and identity formation. Doctoral learning attaches the same importance to knowledge construction and identity formation (Green, 2005). Writing a doctoral thesis brings in major identity transformation (Xu & Hu, 2019) and a shift from student writers to scholarly writers (Morton & Storch, 2019). Doctoral thesis writers encounter challenges in finding and presenting their voices (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019). Writers in EFL settings have been under-represented in the literature (Belcher, 2013). Initial studies of learner identity, conducted in countries where English represents the dominant means of communication, focused predominantly on immigrant learners' experiences of studying a second language (L2) in their host countries or other similar locations (e.g., Belz, 2002; Kanno, 2003; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko, 2001). Despite the call for scholarly attention on doctoral thesis writers (Paré, 2019), there is little research into EFL doctoral thesis writers' development in Non-Native English-speaking countries, such as Thailand.

Furthermore, although writer identity has been proposed to consist of four aspects—autobiographical self, discoursal self, authorial self, and possibilities of selfhood (Ivanič, 1998), most of the research has mainly adopted a corpus approach to discuss the discoursal self (Ivanič, 1998; Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014) or authorial identity (Hyland, 2015). As this research gap reveals, there is an urgent need to critically address how the multiple aspects of writer identity are developed and interact with each other. With respect to these concerns, we attempt to establish the voices of writers and explore how writers' multiple identities are shaped and developed through the practice of EFL doctoral thesis writing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ORIENTATIONS OF RESEARCH ON WRITER IDENTITY

Within a set of shared views about identity, the tension between individual and social perspectives has been increasingly recognized. An individualistic orientation to writer identity

aims to liberate the writer from traditional social bonds and to enhance self-exploration (Bowden, 1999). This extreme view advocates authentic individual expression and believes in the existence of a coherent and autonomous identity. It has caused some writers to resist social conventions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). On the contrary, a social-constructionist orientation regards identity as a social construct generated and maintained by communities (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Bruffee, 1986; Ivanič, 1998). This means that any kind of identity involves affiliating individuals to shared beliefs and values which are available in the social context. This view derives from studies committed to identifying discourse patterns (e.g., Li & Deng, 2019) and providing guidelines to novice writers. Some researchers have criticized this orientation as uncritically treating identity as a fixed and stable entity (Parker, 1989), which overlooks individual variations (Matsuda, 2015).

Spacing between the two extreme positions is the social constructivist orientation, which accounts for how individual uniqueness and social conventions can coexist and are mutually interdependent. With a social constructivist view, Ivanič (1998), Prior (2001), Matsuda (2015), and McKinley (2017) propose writing as an act of writing, socially constructed rather than socially determined. Individual writers who struggle for alternative ways to enter a privileged social group may potentially cause change (Ivanič, 1998). Claiming identity is not "reducible to genres" (Prior, 2001, p. 61), social constructivists propose that sense of self is constructed in the interplay between the individual and social networks. Researchers should consider how the conventions or norms have become established and stabilized by individuals, and how individuals adjust their writings to "the particular rhetorical situation" (Matsuda, 2015, p.149). The social constructivist perspective seeks to identify the interaction between the reader and the writer that is mediated through texts. This study accepts the social constructivist orientation and examines how EFL doctoral thesis writers develop their authorial identities and adjust their writings to a strictly disciplined academia. From this point of view, EFL doctoral thesis writing is a social practice situated in both disciplinary and institutionalized local settings.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WRITER IDENTITY

Identity in writing has been addressed by using different terms, such as *subjectivity* (Weedon, 1997), *self* (Goffman, 1981), *positioning* (Davies & Harré, 1990), *voice* (Matsuda, 2001; 2015), and identity (Ivanič, 1998). Although these terms have differently nuanced connotations (Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014), they can be used interchangeably with different emphases (Ivanič, 1998): *self* is more concerned with private aspects, *subjectivity* and *positioning* are more focused on socially constrained roles.

Identity construction is generally accepted as multiple, dynamic, inherently social rather than individual, and develops a sense of who one is and who one might be through socially shared meaning-making (Ivanič, 1998; Matsuda, 2001, 2015). Identity is a social endeavor instead of an isolated achievement (Hyland, 2010; Prior, 2001). A writer acquires disciplinary knowledge and negotiates himself with the dominant literacy in the community (Guinda & Hyland, 2012). However, he is not free to simply choose from infinite rhetorical and linguistic resources, but is obliged to take on a "suitable" identity in the associated community (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Through the use of community discourses, one claims or resists membership of social groups to define who he is. Matsuda (2001) defines identity (or *voice* in his preference) as "the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from a socially available yet ever-changing repertoire" (p. 40).

We examine all these perspectives and define writer identity as a self-presentation that aligns the individual thesis writer with and differentiates himself from others in the shared

discourse community. Doctoral writers constitute a sense of being through negotiating with the socially shared and enabled resources. The interpersonal meaning-making process of thesis writing provides the site where identity is constituted and reconstituted.

To examine the multiple layers of identities of writers, we adopt Ivanič's conceptual framework (1998), "four aspects of identity." *Autobiographical self* is the established identity that a writer brings to the act of writing. It is formed by ones' "prior social and discoursal history" and constitutes his "current way of being" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24). Along with developing the lived experience, a writer's autobiographical self is "socially constructed and constantly changing" (p.24) and thus affects how he writes. This layer of identity is constructed in social contexts, but remains individual in the sense that it is unique due to the richness and complexity of frequently changing life experiences.

The *Discoursal self* is the impression the writer makes on the reader which is "constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). It is related to values, beliefs, and power relations in the particular social context in which the text is written. The Discoursal self is closely tied to a text. It is about how the writer would like to appear in his text by using discursive and non-discursive features. The writer's anticipation of how readers will reach to a text influences how he represents self .

The a*uthorial self* concerns the sense of self as an author and the presence of this sense in a written text. A writer perceives himself as an author to a greater or lesser extent and develops this sense of authoritativeness in writing. Thus, writers distinguish from each other regarding "how far they claim authority as the source of the content of the text, and how far they establish an authorial presence in their writing" (Ivanič, 1998, p.26). In this study, we investigate how authoritative EFL doctoral theses writers feel, how they establish their authorship for the content, and the extent to which they attribute the authorship to themselves.

The three aspects of writer identity mentioned above concern "actual people writing actual texts" (Ivanič, 1998, p.26). They are identity portraits connected with different individuals. However, the last aspect, *possibilities for selfhood,* does not belong to any individual. This refers to the social resources that allow or constrain people to construct a sense of themselves as being appropriate for the situation. The disciplinary conventions and institutional requirements represent the privileged patterns of writing an EFL doctoral thesis in a specific educational context.

There is a two-way relationship between the socially enabled possibilities for selfhood and the individual's actual identity in the actual writing. On the one hand, the social, cultural, and institutional possibilities for selfhood constrain the shape of the three aspects of actual writers. According to his social group membership, a writer develops an autobiographical self and constructs a discoursal self out of a specific socio-cultural and institutional context. On the other hand, attempts at constructing a discoursal self from less privileged possibilities for selfhood may contribute to a change in the future possibilities for selfhood.

With this conceptual framework, we shall answer the two research questions:

1) How is writer identity constructed in EFL doctoral thesis writing?
2) In what ways do the multiple aspects of a writer's identity interplay through EFL doctoral thesis writing?

METHOD

We adopted a mixed-method design to understand better the complex, multifaceted, dynamic identity of EFL doctoral thesis writers. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected

and analyzed. The two sets of analyses were integrated to cross-validate and compare the findings (Creswell, 2015; Leavy, 2017).

RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

This research is a part of an extensive study that examined EFL postgraduate thesis writing in a university in northeastern Thailand. Statistics show that 146 students from 25 countries are currently studying at the university for their graduate degrees. The university provides twenty doctoral-level programs in the English language, aiming at producing competent academics and professionals, especially in conducting research independently for knowledge construction and continued academic advancement (Regulations for Graduate Studies, 2017). Doctoral students who pass a qualifying examination are eligible to carry out independent scholarly research for a doctoral thesis. The language used in writing a thesis may be Thai or a foreign language, but in practice, it is usually English. The thesis is approved and examined by a thesis committee that consists of no less than five program instructors and external examiners. Doctoral students are required to publish (parts of) their thesis work in a national or international journal.

Thirty-one doctoral thesis writers voluntarily participated in the online EFL postgraduate thesis writer identity survey. The respondents were from seven Asian countries: China (n=15), Indonesia (n=6), Vietnam (n=4), Thailand (n=2), Laos (n=1), Myanmar (n=2), and Pakistan (n=1). Of these, out of practical concerns, eleven volunteers (see Table 1) were purposefully selected for the narrative inquiry session.

TABLE 1. Profiles of Doctoral Participants in the Narrative Inquiry

No.	Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	School
1	Tom	Chinese	Male	Foreign Languages
2	Daniel	Chinese	Male	Foreign Languages
3	Amy	Chinese	Female	Foreign Languages
4	John	Indonesian	Male	Food Technology
5	Tyler	Chinese	Male	Physics
6	Emma	Indonesian	Female	Preclinical
7	Fanny	Thai	Female	Information Technology
8	Murray	Laotian	Female	Foreign Languages
9	Laura	Indonesian	Female	Biotechnology
10	Jack	Myanmar	Male	Environmental Engineering
11	Bess	Vietnamese	Female	Foreign Languages

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The data was collected through three research instruments, generally in a sequential method. We first administered the EFL Postgraduate Thesis Writer Identity Survey that we had previously developed and piloted. Adapted from Ruggles (2012), this five-point Likert-scale survey (see Appendix) integrated four aspects of writer identity (Ivanič, 1998) and identity formation (Hawkins, 2005). A total of 40 questions were arranged in the following five constructs: autobiographical self, discoursal self, authorial self, possibilities of selfhood, and writer identity development. Thirty-one questionnaires were returned with all items completed.

To give voice to the thesis writers, we conducted the following narrative inquiry with eleven selected participants. A narrative inquiry, through both written responses and interviews, has been previously employed to research identity issues (Fang, 2018). In order to obtain a clear informed consensus, the participants were asked to respond to prompts about the development of academic writing ability, experience of EFL doctoral thesis writing, and change of sense of self. Next, we interviewed the same participants to obtain oral data about

their EFL doctoral thesis writing experiences. An interview is useful for collecting information about people's experiences and opinions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). The interview questions were separated into two categories. The first was fifteen semi-structured and open-ended questions, concerning the experiences of thesis writing, the transformations into thesis writers, negotiating a sense of self, authorship, and power relations. The second was asked in a talk-around-text manner. These questions emerged from our analysis of the data obtained from the previous data collection procedures.

Since we developed all the research instruments by referring to previous studies, the instruments' validity and reliability should be checked carefully. Item-objective Congruence (IOC), developed by Rovinelli and Hambleton (1977), was adopted to examine the content validity of the instruments. We sent the evaluation forms to three experts in the filed and invited them to check whether the research instruments measure what they are designed to do. Each expert rated the items and/or questions independently by giving scores from +1 to -1. A rating of 1 means the item is congruent with the objective; -1 means the item is not congruent with the objective; and 0 means the congruence of the item is unclear. Then IOC analysis of each instrument was conducted by examining the experts' opinions. The results of the IOC analysis for the survey was 87.2%, for the written narrative 100%, and for the interview 86.7%. This indicated a high content validity regarding the minimum acceptable value which should be higher or equal to 0.5 ($\geq$0.5) (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977). All the statistics showed that the instruments were highly valid in terms of the content. Cronbach's Alpha (α) Coefficient is capable of indicating the extent to which particular items in a survey measure a specified construct (Christmann & Van Aelst, 2006). We ran Cronbach's Alpha (α) analysis and obtained the result of 0.882, which is higher than the minimum acceptable value 0.70 ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) (George & Mallery 2003). Thus, we established the internal consistency of the items.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was based on the following: First, the data generated from the survey was analyzed using descriptive and frequency statistics, to examine the general tendencies in the data and the spread of the scores. Second, the data drawn from the written narratives and audio-taped interviews were analysed thematically (Saldaña, 2009). Member check was adopted over the process of interview data analysis. Then the written narratives and interview transcripts were analyzed both "vertically and horizontally" (Prabjandee, 2020, p. 8). In the vertical analysis, the data from each instrument were analyzed following the stages of open coding, categorizing units of meaning, and developing themes. Then the data were horizontally analyzed across instruments to refine the themes and interpret the relationships between them. During this process, we iteratively alternated between reading the texts, listening to the interview recordings, and referring to the literature's established themes.

RESULTS

The data from both the surveys and the narrative inquiries revealed a remarkable result. All the aspects of writer identity were dynamically shaped and developed through linguistic and non-linguistic features. In interacting with the social context and negotiating within themselves, the EFL doctoral thesis writers developed a particular self in the complex interplay of other identities. It should be noted that all the quotes from the narrative inquiries are original. We extract particular cases to present the themes instead of telling every thesis writer's stories.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF

We report the findings related to autobiographical self in term of the participants' 1) academic writing literary practices, 2) conceptualization of thesis writing, and 3) a sense of self-worth.

Overall, the participants had developed the ability to write in English for academic purposes, more or less, earlier in their studies. Long-term learning and using English "helped lay the very foundation of writing properly" in the discourse (Amy, Interview). Most of the participants started their EFL academic writing in their undergraduate education. The most frequently mentioned academic writing tasks were articles, theses, course papers, exams, and research reports. Descriptive analysis (see Table 2) indicated a positive impact of these experiences on the students' current EFL postgraduate theses writing (M=4.32). Twenty-nine participants (93.5%) acknowledged that prior EFL academic writing had helped them in their thesis writing. Influences were felt on developing knowledge about academic writing, the discipline, and thesis genre.

> *The experience of writing the bachelor's and MA thesis gave me some very broad ideas about how I am going to think and write through the lenses of the discipline. Not from my personal subjective perspectives, but through the lenses of disciplinary knowledge.*
>
> *(Amy, Interview)*

Interestingly, the participants had some conflicting views on the influence of their first language academic writing experience. Eighteen participants thought that previous academic writing in their first language had contributed to their current thesis writing ability. This positive influence was perceived particularly in argumentative strategies and a proper choice of words.

> *This ability might be benefited from my Chinese writing. From those writing, I practiced how to use proper words to express my thoughts. (Tom, Narratives)*
> *My Chinese teacher trained us how to get high scores in writing exams. That training helped me develop my academic writing ability, not just first language writing but also a second or foreign language writing.* *(Lucy, Narratives)*

Against this view, the negative impact of the first language was pointed out by two Indonesian participants on EFL thesis writing.

> *It's my Indonesian style. We tend to explain everything in too many details. So, sometimes we lost the focus of what the data tell, or what is the main finding of this data. This is kind of my weakness. This is the nature of our language. Many words can be shortened, but we tend to make longer and longer. This influenced me a lot in the writing style.*
>
> *(John, Interview)*

These experiences added to the writers' repertoire of textual practices, consequently forming genres they were more familiar with and ways of dividing the text, and so on.

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics of Academic Writing Literacy

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
My previous experience of academic writing in my first language is helpful in my current thesis writing.	3.61	.989
My previous English academic writing experience is helpful in my thesis writing.	4.32	.599
Valid N (listwise)	31	

The participants conceptualized their thesis writing through their understanding of academic writing. They defined academic writing as professional and formal writing in a third-person tone, discussing the findings straightforwardly with objective data, and closely related to a higher level of English proficiency. Thus, storytelling and narratives were not academic writing but "writing with daily language" (Emma, Interview). The participants considered that discursive features such as terminology, passive voice, formal writing style, and citation techniques are the elements of writing a thesis. This kind of conceptualizing of thesis writing as writing objectively restricted writers' choices. Consciously or unconsciously, the thesis writers wrote in such a way that they thought would make their theses more acceptable by academia. For example, Daniel tried to make his thesis "more academic like" by "using passive voice" and "avoiding using 'I'," while Murray followed her supervisor's suggestions and "went directly to the point."

In this specific context of thesis writing, how the thesis writer understands academic writing became his standard to judge the writing, good or bad, academic or non-academic. One instance is that Tom downplayed his bachelor's and master's degree theses as "not academic writing at all"; therefore, in his current thesis writing, he tried to "avoid doing like that" and wrote "as objective as possible by listing all the facts and giving examples" (from Written Narrative). Furthermore, their conceptualizations shaped a sense of their roles as thesis writers. The interviewees labeled themselves as a "recorder," "writing machine," "part of research tool," or "presenter of information." For example, Fanny took the position of an "outsider" to describe objectively what happened during her research.

> *I want to make me in an objective position, so to keep myself away from this experiment. I try to write like a third party. I don't want to make myself too subjective. So, I tried to tell the story like an outsider.* (Fanny)

A sense of self-worth deals with how assured the thesis writers feels. Table 3 shows the average confidence in the role of writer in English (M=3.54). A positive emotional response to EFL doctoral thesis writing was accordingly expressed, through words like "pleasant", "smooth", "easy", "fluent", "excited", "happy", "confident", and so on. Experience in academic writing, English language proficiency, and positive feedback were the sources of this confidence-building in writing. However, thirteen of the participants (41.9%) responded with a neutral answer, and one (3.2%) claimed a lack of confidence in their thesis writing. Problems were reported at vocabulary, sentence, and paragraph level; how to organize the ideas coherently and logically of particular concern. For example, Laura's performance was recognized by her professor in her apprenticeship in a university in America. However, this confidence was destroyed following negative comments from her supervisor. Laura's supervisor was not satisfied with her writing, which was apparent from his grading of her thesis proposal drafts:

> *For the first time, he gave me F⁻. I was quite shocked why he gave me F and even F⁻. I rewrote my proposal and submitted it to him again. After four times I submitted with him, I still got E.* (Interview)

Being shocked, Laura even did not dare to ask her supervisor why. These negative and harsh comments increased her uncertainty in writing:

> *This is quite hard This kind of feeling makes me worry more about my writing. I check before I send it to my supervisor. Every time.*

TABLE 3. Descriptive Statistics of Confidence in English Writing

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can write well in English.	3.54	.624
Valid N (listwise)	31	

On the contrary, the participants who received positive and encouraging feedback perceived themselves as writers more confidently. In her narrative, Amy reflected her "smooth and pleasant" journey and called herself "a fluent writer." She explained in the interview that her supervisor's encouraging notes inspired her and boosted her confidence in writing. Her supervisor was never hesitant in showing his satisfaction with Amy's writing:

> *He will definitely tell me "you should be proud of this part," or "this part is very well written."*
> *For me, these are very encouraging notes.*   (Amy, Written Narrative)

Praise won out when it came to promoting a writers' sense of self-worth.

The participants attributed these difficulties to the social identity they shared. Most participants (77.4%) thought the fact that English was used as a foreign language per se caused them difficulties in writing a thesis in English. This opinion was further confirmed in the following interviews. For example, some participants thought being a non-native English speaker limited their proficiency in "playing with the language" (Fanny, Interview) and always caused anxiety:

> *I don't feel confident. I'm not a native English speaker, so, I still have some mistakes in the*
> *sentences.*   (Emma)

Most of the participants adopted the role of researcher before that of doctoral student. Working experience as a researcher provided the confidence to call oneself a researcher. Moreover, it was easier for the participants from the Schools of Physics, Food Technology, Biotechnology, Preclinical, and Environmental Engineering to accept the position of a researcher. Some participants did not distinguish between the two roles. They positioned themselves as doctoral students who had to write a thesis in order to graduate, meanwhile, novice researchers contributed to the development of knowledge in their discipline. However, self-effacement was evident from these two interviewees.

> *I do not see myself as a researcher. Researcher is a very respectful identity. It's very far away*
> *from my identity.*   (Daniel)
> *They said they have their traditional ways of writing thesis. I should follow them. So, I am not a*
> *complete researcher.*   (Tom)

DISCOURSAL SELF

The discoursal self is the impression a writer conveys of himself in his written text. The descriptive analysis (see Table 4) showed a strong awareness of constructing discoursal self in EFL doctoral thesis writing. First, the participants recognized the importance of showing voice. They tried to put their real voice into the writing (M=3.48), intended to portray a professional writer's image to the readers (M=3.68), and embedded their own values and beliefs were embedded in their writing (M=4.00).

TABLE 4. Descriptive Statistics of Discoursal Self

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I put the "real me" in my thesis.	3.48	1.029
My writing expresses what I really think and believe.	4.00	.683
I try to impress the thesis readers that I am a professional writer.	3.68	.791
Valid N (listwise)		31

The participants' desire to build a unique discoursal self was displayed in developing their ways of writing and organizing their ideas. For instance,

> *Everyone has his own writing style. Someone else in our group, if he has the same experience,*
> *he may write the thesis with similar content, but in a very different writing style.* (Tyler)
> *I came up with the best way to develop my thesis.* (Amy)

Thesis writers insisted their writing should be generally acceptable to the mainstream of academia. In this sense, writing "objectively" was mentioned as a standard for writing up scientific research, "at least for face validity" (Tom) and "without any human touches" (Amy). Furthermore, this objective writing was implemented by avoiding self-mention, considering readers' interests, using discursive features appropriately, and formatting as required.

Second, the findings showed the thesis writers' consideration of the readers' interest (see Table 5). On the one hand, writing to self-please was placed centrally (M=4.19). With only three participants carving out a neutral position, twenty-eight participants (87.1%) wrote their theses in a way that would please themselves as readers. When being asked about this, Daniel and Bess particularly emphasized that working on the issues of interest motivated them and gave them self-satisfaction so they could move on to the next stages. On the other hand, nineteen of the participants (61.3%) considered their readers' interests. A simplified form of language was used by some participants to make their writing easier to read.

TABLE 5. Descriptive Statistics of Discoursal Self

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
It is important for me to like what I have written.	4.19	.654
When writing thesis, I consider the interest of the readers.	3.65	.755
I use hedges like "may", "might", "maybe", etc. in my discussion.	2.48	1.061
The language choices I make are deliberate and reflect who I am.	3.68	.653
Valid N (listwise)		31

The participants presumed quite a narrow readership of their thesis, including supervisors, thesis examiners, and maybe a few fellow graduate students in their discipline. It is worth noting that the graduate thesis writers clearly recognized the higher social status of their anticipated readers which would increase their power in relations. Bearing this power relationship in mind, they modified their methods of presentation and organised their texts accordingly according to their supervisors' suggestions and the expectations of their thesis committee members.

> *I wanted to make it as objective as possible and to avoid subjective things. I list all the facts, I*
> *used many examples, I quoted to support my ideas. I am even very careful about the format, the*
> *page number, the wording, because I want to persuade the committee members it seems good.*
> (Tom)

Third, the participants claimed they owned their theses. This sense of ownership was represented through their selection of research topics, their ways of developing ideas, and their word choices. Discursive features were employed to construct the discoursal self. Hedges were reported as being frequently used by twenty of the participants (64.5%). Word choices reflected their discoursal selves in the written discourses. Eighteen of the participants (58.1%) believed their language choices reflected themselves. Meanwhile, the participants admitted the influence of external voices on their discoursal construction of identity. Their supervisors' feedback directly influenced their feelings and determined their writing styles.

AUTHORIAL SELF

The authorial self is concerned with a writer's sense of authoritativeness in writing. Descriptive statistics (see Table 6) indicated that the participants held some conflicting opinions about developing self as the authors of their theses. They adopted a robust authorial stance and firmly claimed their authorship of the theses (M=3.94). Twenty-five of the participants (80.6 %) believed their voices should be conveyed through their theses. Most of the participants claimed their ideas (Mean = 3.68), which showed they strongly asserted their positions. In addition, a strong sense of self as an author was revealed from the general self-confidence in expressing their ideas (Mean=3.84). At last, a high mean score of 4.32 showed that the majority of the participants researched the topics of their interest.

In contrast to this strong desire for an authorial presence, there was a lack of authoritativeness realized through actual writing. Self-mention was seldom used (M=1.81): only two participants used the proper noun "I" to refer to themselves in their theses. The participants stamped their authorship on their writings to a very limited extent (M=1.87). Twenty-six thesis writers (83.9%) cited many previous studies and attributed arguments to researchers who they thought were more authoritative.

TABLE 6. Descriptive Statistics of Self as Author

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I use "I" in my thesis.	1.81	.833
I cite the previous researchers a lot to support my ideas.	1.87	.922
I don't claim my ideas because I want to play safe.	3.68	1.107
I should have my own voice in my own thesis.	3.94	.680
I am confident in expressing my ideas in thesis.	3.84	.779
I am really interested in my research topic.	4.32	.600
Valid N (listwise)		43

The findings from the interview data further revealed this conflict between the authority that was desired and that which was actually conveyed. On the one hand, the interviewees claimed the authority for what they had researched and written. For instance, Emma mentioned the novelty of her study, and Jack expressed confidence in his contributions to his study. Their great efforts in research for their theses and their writing increased their confidence in claiming ideas.

On the other hand, the thesis writers tended to avoid self-mention as it was considered inappropriate and thus definitely unacceptable to the participants from the hard science disciplines. The belief of "never using I" was deeply rooted in their classroom or acquired from the readings. Writing without referring to the researcher personally (e.g. 'I') was believed to help avoid subjective bias. For example, Tyler believed the primary function of writing in scientific research was to record and interpret the results objectively. Even the writers from the

Social Sciences seldom used first-person pronouns. Although they admitted being exposed to research articles in which "I" or "we" were employed, they refused to do the same in their own thesis writing. Only two participants used "I" to refer to themselves. However, one said she used "I" only when she had no other choice, and the other deleted "I" in her later writing after her supervisor directly showed his "dislike" of such a usage. The findings also showed a general tendency to align one's studies to those of established research writers. Citation was frequently adopted to make the writing appear more academic, the arguments more persuasive, or simply to play safe:

> *I provide my idea directly, and then give some citation or reference to support it. That is what I was taught. Because this is thesis writing, I must use many citations, references, to show that I have read many research papers, I have done much literature review, that is very objective, not subjective.* (Daniel)
> *I got my own ideas first, then I searched the sources that have the same ideas with mine. I used their voice to express my own voice, to make me safe.* (Tom)

As these examples show, the thesis writers considered quotation to be essential in thesis writing. Citation was a means of demonstrating what other researchers believe in the discipline. As graduate students, they wanted to apply what they had learned previously. Also, as newcomers to academia they felt the need of the authority of expert researchers. They followed the conventions of academic writing.

POSSIBILITIES OF SELFHOOD

Possibilities of selfhood are the options available for writers to construct a sense of themselves as appropriate in the sociocultural context. The participants had acquired knowledge of the thesis genre (see Table 7). They knew the possible ways of writing a thesis in a university setting and tried to follow them. For the eight items in this group, the mean scores ranged from 3.03 to 4.00.

TABLE 7. Descriptive Statistics of Possibilities of Selfhood

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I know what a good thesis is like in my discipline.	4.00	.632
Reading thesis in the discipline is my way to learn how to write a thesis.	4.00	.856
I am familiar with the components of a thesis.	4.23	.669
I know the rules of thesis writing in my school.	3.81	.749
When writing my thesis, I stick to the rules.	3.84	.688
There is usually one best way to write a thesis.	3.03	.948
I write in a way my readers can understand me.	3.98	.482
I have a strong sense of belonging to an academic community.	3.52	.769
Valid N (listwise)	43	

A frequency analysis supported the findings mentioned above. Within a broad social setting, almost all the participants had learned what kind of thesis was recognized as good in their disciplines. Similarly, they knew about the main characteristics of a thesis genre. Twenty-nine participants (93.6%) were familiar with the components of a thesis, while twenty-five (80.6%) had read graduate theses in their disciplines to learn how to write a thesis. Twenty-three thesis writers (74.2%) acknowledged that they knew and observed the rules of thesis writing in their schools. The participants held opposing views in their responses to the statement, "there is usually one best way to write a thesis." The statistics tended to show extreme binary opinions: ten participants (32.2%) agreed with the statement above, while

eleven of the others (35.5%) disagreed. Twenty-seven of the participants (87.1%) had thought about the theses' readability.

The participants had developed an awareness of the discourse communities to which they belonged. They had learned the disciplinary conventions from academic writing courses, reading, and attending international conferences. Thus, they had consolidated a knowledge of the conventions used in practice. Lexical choices, syntactic forms, and textual structures were well-established within their disciplines:

> *People all over the world who do Physics, when we write the papers or theses, we all follow the same models, same structure.* (Tyler)

Because of these established writing patterns, some participants did not, therefore, consider writing a thesis difficult or did not encounter struggles in thesis writing. Overall, the thesis writers believed their familiarity with disciplinary conventions was an advantage. These conventions allowed them certain options and provided them with appropriate linguistic features.

By comparison with the established norms within their disciplines, they acquired knowledge of the expectations on thesis writing of their institutions relatively implicitly. Some participants complained about difficulties in figuring out the thesis format. The university provided the format, but the guidelines were written in Thai, but as they could not read Thai, they had no choice but to follow the formats used by their seniors. Daniel commented on this, "even the format of the thesis I just got from the seniors or classmates." In addition, some participants mentioned the "invisible game rules" in thesis writing (Tom). Through observation and listening to "gossip" from fellow students, thesis writers found out about the unspoken concerns of faculty members regarding thesis writing. Supervisors and thesis committee members were considered representatives of the localized institutional discourse community to whom their theses would be addressed.

The participants felt that both the disciplinary and institutional options should be provided to them explicitly. They realized that they had to learn what and how they should write their theses in an appropriate form. Most of them chose to follow the conventions under the pressure of being able to graduate, because of their concerns about remaining student researchers and avoiding conflicts with their supervisors. However, the existence of conventions should offer options rather than constraints.

> *Conventions are formed because people are doing things in the community. They form this kind of habit, or maybe the most effective ways to contribute their knowledge to the disciplines. And for us, new researchers, or new writers to the communities, we must know and understand the conventions. Only when we have a full understanding of the conventions, we can make full use of that in our own way, then we can play with the conventions.* (Amy)

DISCUSSION: SELF-ADJUSTMENT AND SOCIAL ACCULTURATION

Following the conceptual framework of "four aspects of writer identity" (Ivanič, 1998), this study found that the desired scholarly writer identity was dynamically constructed through integrating multiple aspects of self-presentation (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Ivanič, 1998; Li & Deng, 2019; Matsuda, 2015). Next, we will discuss the writers' integration of self-adjustment and social acculturation.

Self-adjustment is the writer's interaction with oneself. In a processual view (Lemke, 2002), we admit the shifting nature of writer identity and take thesis writing as a continuously changing process of self-identification (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). The autobiographical self is what doctoral students bring to the thesis writing process. The participants possess different

autobiographies, particularly in terms of development in their academic writing ability, conceptualization of thesis writing, and sense of self-worth.

Due to different levels of exposure to English academic writing practices, the participants had experienced a variety of English backgrounds and consequently defined themselves as either "good" or "bad" writers. Consequently, this self-concept may have brought them a feeling of ease or anxiety in writing. The participants continuously identified their writing in terms of what they considered to be a "good" thesis. They attempted to adjust and make their writings become more thesis like.

Self-worth is always a problem for non-native English speakers' identity because they worry a great deal about the quality of their writing. There is a constant fear of feeling "deficient compared to speakers of 'standard' English" (Norton & De Costa, 2018, p. 101). A general lack of confidence in writing was reported by the participants. However, the evidence provided does not reveal a distinct impact of one's first language on constructing an authorial identity (Matsuda, 2001; Zhao, 2019). Meanwhile, self-worth is dynamic in that assurance in writing changes with the development of thesis writing. One interesting finding is how others' labeling of thesis writers contributes to their self-identification. Negative external voices deconstruct a thesis writers' confidence and make him/her more cautious in making grammatical mistakes and using illogical expressions. In contrast, approval of one's writing promotes positive emotions and boosts the confidence of the thesis writers.

Therefore, we argue that the three major points of the autobiographical self, as mentioned above, influence the participants' discoursal construction of self and authorial presence. The participants' understanding of what is a good thesis in the discipline influences their discourse choices, such as word choices, sentence structures, writing styles, and ways of formatting the texts. These choices ultimately determine the image of the doctoral writers conveyed in the written text. Our findings are consistent with those of Li & Deng (2019) in that aspects of self-representation share different roles. However, constructing an authorial self in an EFL doctoral thesis differs from those used in the writing of personal statements. Despite being proposed as a significant presentation of authorial self (Hyland 2001; Ivanič & Camps, 2001), self-mention was seldom accepted or utilized by the participants. This can be interpreted as a signal of a desire, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid the use of the autobiographical self in thesis writing. Citation was frequently used because this is a well-established convention for thesis writers to follow.

Social acculturation refers to the participation of EFL postgraduate thesis writers in social interactions. The participants struggled to develop a voice and establish their desired identity. An awareness of discourse communities is valuable in establishing the identity of successful thesis writers. Like most EFL learners in non-English speaking countries, the participants have rarely been informed of the notion of textual construction of voice (Zhao, 2014). However, the participants learned through their academic practice that a thesis speaks to a particular readership. The desire to obtain membership of the academic discourse community motivated the participants to acculturate themselves into the social context. Both disciplinary and institutional possibilities of selfhood provided options rather than constraints on the participants' EFL doctoral thesis writing.

As novice writers, the doctoral students welcomed overt instruction of these "game rules." Most participants chose to accommodate themselves to what they perceived as privileged patterns in the institution. The negative side of this passive alignment leads to an actual distancing from discoursal construction of writer identity: the participants tend to tone down their voice, which could be observed from the rare use of self-mention, using hedges, and frequent citations. Also, the role of doctoral students hinders them from revealing their opinions. Feeling inferior in the disciplinary community, the thesis writers dared not claim their ideas without referring to recognized expert members. Their expected readers were restricted

to supervisors and thesis committee members. Although mostly passive, the students' compliance with conventions were conditional. The researcher's role, even for novices, should be more overtly promoted because a doctoral thesis is expected to uncover new knowledge (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019). Social acculturation can also be found in writers' efforts in finding their way towards developing a thesis, considering the readers' interests, and discussion from a critical perspective. To some extent, this echoes Hyland & Tse's (2012) idea that socially enabled conventions provide writers not only with particular ways to represent themselves, but also opportunities to "negotiate new positions" (p. 156).

Although writer identity consists of four different aspects, the autobiographical self and the possibilities of self-hood stand out as the most dominant categories in constructing the participants' identities. These two aspects interplay and work together to determine the discoursal self and the extent to which authoritativeness is shown. The autobiographical self is the accumulated experiences of the writers' being exposed to the socially available options. The type of social possibilities to which the writers have access is vital. The participants whose writing quality has been appraised by their supervisors, thesis committee members, or fellow students have acquired more confidence in their writing styles. However, the student writers whose writing abilities are not acknowledged by themselves or others, struggle more for self-presentation with limited available options. This finding shares some similarities with the claim of Burgess & Ivanič (2010) who argued that if a writer experiences the possibilities of selfhood in which he is treated without an authorial role at all, it is likely that he will develop a sense of inferiority in his autobiographical self. Such a feeling may discourage the writer in engaging in writing and lead his writing "in a militant way" (p. 246).

According to Burgess & Ivanič (2010), multiple selves are constructed "by writers' selection of particular discoursal characteristics in the design of their texts" (p.235). The language choices are enabled by the possibilities for selfhood (Ivanič, 1998). This means that self-representations are enacted in the process of selecting appropriate ways of writing. The thesis writers cannot construct their voice from an infinite repertoire of possibilities. The resources are not only culturally available as explained in the literature (Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Matsuda, 2001, 2015; Tardy, 2012) but also varied for individual writers. Personal histories, especially in academic literary activities, are greatly affected by exposure to the conventions. These conventions of thesis writing provide choices which confine students' writings within the norms.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Writer identity is constructed through self-adjusting one's writing practice to the existing conventions and through a process of social acculturation into the target academic discourse community. Unlike their native speaker counterparts, the participants' sense of being EFL users influences their identity construction in terms of self-worth, confidence in writing, and responses to the conventions of writing. Most of the participants had not been sufficiently exposed to the concept of authorial representation. Lacking awareness of authorship is one reason why the participants passively followed the disciplinary conventions and the expectations of their institutions. It is this passive alignment that causes an actual distancing from the discoursal construction of writer identity. Self-marginalization as EFL learners, negative external voices, and the role of student writer most hinder the development and representation of the authorial self.

The current study provides the following implications. Firstly, this study brings potential enlightenment to exploring the experience of EFL doctoral thesis writing in non-native English-speaking contexts. Secondly, this research helps enrich the literature on writer identity. It contends that the autobiographical self and the possibilities of selfhood should be

more addressed in the construction of writer identity in EFL doctoral theses. However, due to the limited sample of EFL doctoral thesis writers at a university in Thailand, the findings may not be generalized to thesis writer identity construction in other EFL educational contexts. Besides, the L2 Writer Identity Survey was adapted from Ruggles (2012) and designed with the conceptual framework of four aspects of writer identity. After checking the validity and reliability, the survey was piloted and modified. However, the survey needs to be administrated to a larger number of participants, including those thesis writers at an undergraduate level or a Master's level. In this light, it might help validate the results and perpetuate more authentic voices of writers. The application of this research instrument to further research should be cautious.

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APPENDIX

EFL POSTGRADUATE THESIS WRITER IDENTITY SURVEY
(Adapted from Ruggles, 2012)

Directions: This survey is to gather information about experience in writing post-graduate thesis in English and constructing an L2 writer identity. Please read each statement carefully and tick (√) the response which best shows your level of agreement.

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree,5 = strongly agree.

Statements	Strongly Disagree Agree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
My previous experience of academic writing in my first language is helpful in this thesis writing.	1	2	3	4	5
My previous English academic writing experience is helpful in this thesis writing.	1	2	3	4	5
I write my thesis in the way I used to write.	1	2	3	4	5
I am not a native English speaker; thus, I have difficulties in writing a thesis in English.	1	2	3	4	5
My English proficiency does NOT affect my progress in the thesis writing.	1	2	3	4	5
I can write well in English.	1	2	3	4	5
It is important for me to like what I have written.	1	2	3	4	5
I put the "real me" in my thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I can hear my voice as I write and read my thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
My writing expresses what I really think and believe.	1	2	3	4	5
When writing thesis, I consider the readers' interest.	1	2	3	4	5
I try to impress the readers with my thesis I am a professional writer.	1	2	3	4	5
I use hedges like "may", "might", "maybe" in discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
The language choices I make are deliberate and reflect who I am.	1	2	3	4	5
I use "I" in my thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I cite the previous researchers a lot to support my ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
I don't claim my ideas because I want to play safe.	1	2	3	4	5
I should have my own voice in my own thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I am confident in expressing my ideas in the thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I am really interested in my thesis topic.	1	2	3	4	5
I never say no to my supervisor's feedback on my thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel comfortable in communicating with my supervisor.	1	2	3	4	5
Sometimes I argue with my supervisor and try to convince him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
I have to follow all the suggestions from the thesis committee members.	1	2	3	4	5
I know what a good thesis is like in my discipline.	1	2	3	4	5
Reading graduate thesis in the discipline is my way to learn how to write a thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I am familiar with the components of a thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I know the rules of thesis writing in my school.	1	2	3	4	5
When writing thesis, I stick to the rules.	1	2	3	4	5
There is usually one best way to write a thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
I write in a way my readers can understand me.	1	2	3	4	5
I have a strong sense of belonging to the academic community.	1	2	3	4	5

Thesis writing helps improve my academic writing ability.	1	2	3	4	5
I was not confident at the beginning of my thesis writing.	1	2	3	4	5
Thesis writing increases my self-confidence in English writing.	1	2	3	4	5
Thesis writing has given me deep personal satisfaction.	1	2	3	4	5
I am confident in the quality of my thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
My thesis is building new knowledge to the discipline.	1	2	3	4	5
I put myself as a researcher when writing the thesis.	1	2	3	4	5
Thesis writing has nothing to do with how I feel about myself.	1	2	3	4	5

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daping Wu is a lecturer at Honghe University, China, and currently a PhD candidate at School of Foreign Languages, Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. Her research interests include L2 writing, learner identity, writer identity construction, English for academic purposes, world Englishes. dapingwu1981@gmail.com

Adcharawan Buripakdi holds a PhD in Composition & TESOL and is an assistant professor at School of Foreign Languages, Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. Her research interests include World Englishes, L2 writing, and identity. Her recent publications appeared in International Journal of Applied Linguistics. She is co-editor of Situating Moral and Cultural Values in ELT Materials: The Southeast Asian Context (2018).