English Language Learners, Writing Challenges, and Writing Identities: Experiences of

Graduate Student Writers in Education

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Abstract

This qualitative research, grounded within a sociocultural perspective, investigated the experiences of non-native speakers of English when they write in an academic context in graduate level education courses. I explored writing challenges and success, the effects of challenges on writing identity, and strategies and environment that enhance writing competency of 3 English Language Learners (ELLs) in an Ontario University. Data were collected through a survey design including a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and post-interview questions. Data analysis adopted a 6-step process for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data described by Creswell (2015). The study's theoretical framework encompassed Ivanič's (2004) multilayered view of language, and Ivanič's (1998) 4 aspects of writing identities. Findings suggest that ELLs' academic literacy practices are influenced by various elements, their writing identities are constructed and shifted in the academic setting, and their writing challenges have a significant influence on different aspects of their writing identities. In addition, ELLs can improve their writing competency and make progress in their academic literacy if they are provided with an appropriate and supportive learning environment, practices, and strategies. The study discusses implications of findings and suggests areas for further research.

Key words

Writing challenges, writing identities, writing strategies, non-native graduate students, Education field

Dedication

To Saeid, Sobhan, and Daniel

Table of Contents

vi

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Writing is often the most complicated proficiency among language skills for English Language Learners (ELLs) to acquire and through which they can express themselves and communicate with various audiences. Interacting in the English language and acquiring language competency leads many ELLs to construct and develop new ways of thinking and perceiving, which causes their writing identity to evolve (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Burke, 2010; Fernsten, 2008; Gao, Jia, & Zhou, 2015; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Li, 2007; Shen, 1989). This qualitative research study is grounded within a sociocultural perspective and investigates the experiences of non-native speakers of English when they write in an academic context. In particular, the study focuses on the perspectives of graduate students in a Master of Education program at an Ontario university. I was interested in finding out about their challenges, difficulties, achievements, and successes. I had a keen interest in exploring how ELLs' challenges affect their writing identities in the new language, and my experience as a student in this field afforded me an insider status that helped me gain a better understanding of ELLs' experiences.

For this major research paper, data were collected through a survey design comprising a questionnaire (Jansen, 2010), semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2015), and post-interview questions. Data analysis has been done through a six-step process for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data as described by Creswell (2015). The study summarized strategies that the participants used to overcome their difficulties while writing in the academic context.

In this chapter, I explain my personal interest in the study, statement of the

problem, purpose of the study, empirical questions, theoretical framework, importance of the study, and scope and limitations of the study.

My Personal Interest in the Study

My research interest in ELLs' writing challenges and writing identities stems from my interest in writing and my long experience as an ELL who always seeks ways and methods to improve my language competency. However, my recent experience as a non-native speaker of English in a Canadian university was my main motivation for this research. The following passage explains my story.

***

It was all about the day that the professor wanted us to read aloud our assignments to the group. We were supposed to write a technological narrative and explain our first exposure to technology. I was the last one in our group and after listening to others, to tell you the truth, I did not dare to read mine as I noticed that what I had written was entirely different from the others. My voice was unsteady as I read my notes, and I was worried about the professor's and other students' reflections. All of the students mentioned working with computers, sending emails, and typing as their first experience with the technology but I began my story far earlier (to when I was only 4 months old) and I wrote about formula that I drank as food technology. We were supposed to write only 400 words. I divided my paper into five sections with different headings that showed my experience with technology in chronological order. I began with food technology, followed by transportation technology, communication technology, educational technology, and finally war technology. Even though I received a good grade (90 out of 100), I still had concerns about my time and emotions in the class. I felt a surge of

anxiety, tension, and uneasiness. I started to think and feel deeply about my writing

experience on that day. What I wrote that day was different in many ways from what the

native speakers wrote, and I could categorize such differences into three major groups:

my educational background; my cultural background; and my way of thinking of,

viewing, and perceiving the world.

<p align="center">***</p>

I love writing and in my first language, Persian, I can write competently with

great confidence; however, in English, I experience a range of emotional states mainly

because I cannot convey my thoughts and purposes as I intend. This challenge causes me

to be concerned about how others perceive me in the second language. I am aware of the

numerous problems and difficulties that other students like me experience during their

studies. As a non-native speaker of English who struggles with different aspects of

second language acquisition, I am very interested in doing research on ELLs' challenges,

difficulties, and successes, especially in developing their writing competencies and

writing identities in their second language.

Statement of the Problem

The expectations for academic writing at the graduate level are high, and many

ELLs encounter difficulties in doing their assignments, writing high-quality papers, and

writing the final project or thesis. This may lead them to represent their writing identities

in the second language context that is not ideal, and to experience emotional conditions

mainly because they find themselves feeling helpless and different from native speakers.

Cadman's (1997) research about international students' writing problems reveals that "A

significant cause of difficulty may lie in different epistemologies in which these students

have been trained and in which their identities as learners are rooted" (p. 3). Being aware of influential features such as various learning styles and attitudes to demonstration of knowledge that are rooted in different educational and cultural backgrounds of language learners are important in studying of ELLs' writing problems.

I decided to study students like myself in order to learn about their difficulties and to add to the research and knowledge about non-native graduate students who are often learning English and new ways of thinking and writing at the same time. Educational research on ELLs has shed light on many aspects of second language acquisition (Al-Buainain, 2009; Ghabool, Ewina, & Kashef, 2012). However, writing problems and the construction of new writing identities of non-native speakers at the graduate level need more investigation and research (Cadman, 1997; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Norton, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore non-native English speakers' views, experiences, challenges, difficulties, and achievements about their writing in the field of education in a graduate program at an Ontario university. It also sought to examine how their problems, challenges, and achievements affect the construction of their writing identities in the new language, and to identify strategies utilized by participants while dealing with their writing problems and difficulties at the graduate level.

Research Questions

The three focal research questions were:

1. What are the main challenges and successes that ELLs experience in graduate programs in Education when developing their writing competency in university settings?

2. How do their challenges and successes affect their writing identities in the second language?

3. What kinds of relationships, experiences, strategies, and learning settings can help ELLs construct a strong writing identity in the new language, and to become successful academic writers?

Through these three questions, I provided deep information about the participants' writing challenges and the evolution of their identities in an English-speaking academic environment, which was different from their previous experience and education.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a sociocultural conceptual framework. From this perspective, as Vygotsky argues, "human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development" (John-Steiner & Mahen, 1996, p. 191). Sociocultural theory proposes that learning is "a social process in which culturally and historically situated participants engage in culturally valued activities, using cultural tools" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 419). According to this theory, language learners are "differentially-positioned members of social and historical collectivities, using (and thus learning) language as a dynamic tool" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 419). Ivanič (2004) proposes a multilayered view of language that includes text at its core, surrounded by cognitive process, event, and sociocultural and political context (see Figure 1).
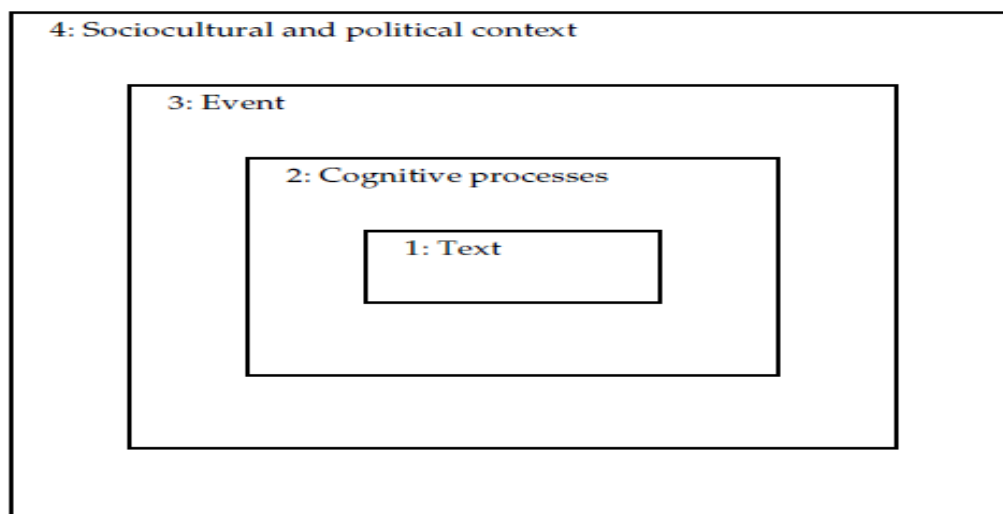
Figure 1. A multilayered view of language (Ivanič, 2004, p. 223).

Ivanič (2004) states that the textual aspect of language is inseparable from mental and sociocultural aspects. She considers writing as "purpose-driven communication in a social context" (p. 234).The types of text that English language learners write in academic contexts are essays, papers, and theses. The model's second layer comprises cognitive process, which is about what happens in the minds of people who produce language; as Street (1991) states, "literacy in itself autonomously will have effects on other social and cognitive practices" (p. 1). In the case of ELLs at the graduate level, they frequently think about the English native speakers' attitudes and views about themselves and they compare their writing abilities in their first language to English.

The model's third layer—event—refers to the characteristics such as time, place, and purpose of language use in the social context, which for ELLs can be academic context (time and place) and studying at the graduate level to earn a degree (purpose). The fourth layer, sociocultural and political context, includes sociocultural resources such as "the multimodal practices, discourses and genres which are supported by the cultural context within which language use is taking place, and the patterns of privileging and relations of power among them" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 224). ELLs must meet the cultural expectations of the English academic context in order to be successful in their communication through their writing, and writing competently in the academic setting plays an important role in ELLs' academic success (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007).

Based on the sociocultural perspective, academic literacies involve social practices that vary according to culture, genre, and context. Lea and Street (2006) point out that "literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as varied social practices associated with different communities" (p. 368). Further, Lea and Street (2006)

note that "educational research into student writing in higher education has fallen into three main perspectives or models: 'study skills'; 'academic socialisation'; and 'academic literacies'" (p. 158). In this study, I draw on the third approach—academic literacies— that considers writing as a social practice and "views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 158). In this approach, students in their writing practices utilize different genre, discourse, and linguistic features to communicate appropriately in their community and construct identities that evoke from the social context.

Studies show that ELLs' difficulties in writing area cause them to struggle with the literacy demands of academic context (Angelova & Riazantsewa, 1999; Casanave, 1995). This study examines graduate students' writing practices within the Western academic context to explore their challenges in a different sociocultural context from their home culture.

While some psychologists consider identity as a set of stable characteristics amongst learners (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Oberg, 1960; Smalley, 1963), identity in relation to sociocultural theory is considered something that

> is not unitary or fixed but has multiple facets; is subject to tensions and
> contradictions and is in a constant state of flux, varying from one time and one
> space to another. This multifaceted identity is constructed in the interaction
> between a person, others, and their sociocultural context. (Burgess & Ivanič,
> 2010, p. 232)

Proponents of sociocultural theory view L2 identity as "multiple, dynamic, and ambivalent" (Gao et al., 2015, p. 138). Such a view shows that identity is a changeable

and adjustable construction. Norton and Toohey (2011) state that "language learners' identities are always multiple and in process, and that learners often have different investments in the language practices of their classrooms and communities" (p. 437). In other words, the context and the social interaction within the context influence the development of the identity. Familiarity with the culture, ideas, and norms of the second language society is important for ELLs and may have a significant role in the construction of their writing identity in English language.

Therefore, in this study, I also explore the effects of ELLs' writing challenges on the reconstruction of their writing identity while writing in an academic context that is different from their academic educational and cultural background. To do so, I draw on Ivanič's (1998) four aspects of writer identities, namely: autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as autho, and possibilities for self-hood.

Ivanič (1998) explains that autobiographical self refers to what writers bring into the act of writing from their past. The past education, history, believes, thoughts, and views of the writers can be distinguished from their writing. Discoursal self refers to the writer's voice, which is "constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text that reflect values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). For example, this aspect of writing identity for ELLs at the graduate level can be affected by instructors' expectations. The third aspect, self as author, refers to the sense of self-worth and the writer's authorship. Ivanič (1998) explains that this aspect of writer identity means that the self "has something to say" (p. 184) and writers are different in "how far they claim authorial presence in their writing" (p. 26). According to Ivanič, possibilities for self-hood refers to possibilities within the

sociocultural context, which help writers to shape their writing identity. The choices and possibilities that are provided within the academic context may lead ELLs to construct their new ideal writing identity. I argue that these four aspects participants' writing identities were affected by their writing difficulties and whether or not the participants were successful in establishing these aspects of their writing identity in the Canadian academic setting.

Importance of the Study

When ELLs enroll in graduate level programs, they are expected to write according to a high academic standard. Even if they are competent writers in their first language, they may struggle in the second language. Good writing competency is an essential tool for ELLs particularly at the graduate level, as they have to write their assignments, academic papers for journals, and final project, exit paper, or thesis. It is important to pay attention to non-native students' problems, as they represent a significant population in university graduate programs (Friesen & Keeney, 2013). Exploring learners' writing challenges may help them construct a strong writing identity and to represent themselves appropriately through the texts that they produce.

While ELLs develop their writing skills, they create new identities and establish a second cultural self (Shen, 1989). Accordingly, it is necessary for ELLs to be aware of different influences on their identities' development in the second language. Being competent in writing helps ELLs represent their thoughts and communicate with their audience clearly and professionally. In this way, they can develop their writing identities in the sense of themselves as competent writers.

In addition, the result of this research can help instructors and any others who

work with non-native speakers at the graduate level to understand the writing problems of the focal participants and they may be able to apply findings to other non-native graduate students. It is important to be aware that when learners learn another language, they also develop new identities and new ways of thinking. The results of this study may aid instructors and program providers in providing opportunities and acting as facilitators for language learners during their identities' evolution. Further, it may help them determine practical curriculum, strategies, and activities that would be most beneficial for language learners and meet their particular needs.

<div align="center">**Scope and Limitations of the Study**</div>

This qualitative research study aims to explore the writing difficulties and writing identities of non-native students at the graduate level in the education field. The participants comprised three graduate students in Education from an Ontario university. People who had experience in the field of Education and people within fields related to Education were of primary interest here. The size of the study group was small; however, this small number allowed the researcher to spend more time with each participant and to explore his or her difficulties in more detail and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' challenges when writing and constructing their writing identities in the second language. At the same time, the small sample size does not allow one to transfer and generalize the results to all other non-native graduate students in other contexts but still offers possibilities for resonance. Participants' challenges and identity evolution was reflected through their own lenses. No data were collected through direct observation; however, this study sought to reveal what people believe about their own writing, rather than what an observer could see. A questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and post-

interview questions were administered. Participants were interviewed once to follow up on the questionnaire.

Overview of the Research

This major research paper has five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 includes review of theories and studies related to writing challenges and writing identities of ELLs. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the methods and methodology of this research, including the research design, research process, reflexivity, credibility, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents findings, beginning with background information about the three research participants, their thoughts and views derived from their answers to the questionnaire, interviews, and post-interview questions, as well as a discussion related to the three research questions. Chapter 5 presents a summary of findings and discussion, strengths and limitations of the research, implications, areas for future research, and my final reflections.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter discusses theories and studies related to ELLs' writing challenges, the evolution of ELLs' writing identities while writing in an academic context, and strategies and learning environments that can help language learners improve their writing competency and develop their writing identities.

Chapter 2 has four sections. In section one; I describe three common writing challenges for ELLs in academic settings, including linguistic knowledge, cultural differences, and critical thinking. The first section also discusses research in these three areas. In section two, I present a definition of writing identity, research on writing identity development, how it is revealed in the second language writing, and the influential elements on writing identity. In section three, I discuss strategies and learning settings that help ELLs to overcome their writing difficulties and develop their writing competency. I conclude chapter 2 with a summary of the chapter.

ELLs' Writing Challenges

ELLs encounter many challenges during the writing task, especially at the graduate level, as they need to write high-quality texts. The following section describes how the lack of linguistic knowledge, cultural differences, and critical thinking are some of the common challenges that ELLs experience while developing their writing competency.

Linguistic Knowledge

Linguistic knowledge, including syntax and semantic knowledge (Wren, 2000), is one of the significant competencies that ELLs need in order to write clearly and accurately. Zhao and Hirvela (2015) point out that "the intertextuality practices of

academic composing involve a complex set of literacy skills and knowledge" (p. 219). Linguistic knowledge is expressed through the ways in which vocabulary, grammar, and conventions are expressed in students' writing. The production of a high-quality academic text requires sufficient vocabulary knowledge as the lexicon size has a great effect on writers' ability to express their ideas. Likewise, ELLs need to have adequate grammatical knowledge to put words in a logical order and to produce understandable sentences (Schoonen et al., 2003). If students are unable to use syntax and semantic rules appropriately, they will produce texts that are ill structured and too difficult to understand.

In order to write effectively students, need to be familiar with the academic language and literacy that is acceptable at the university level. Lea and Street (2006) indicate that "One of the difficulties that many students encounter as they shift into higher education involves writing and academic discourse. Students from linguistic minority community backgrounds may experience such difficulties to a greater degree than some other students" (p. 370). Studies of ELLs' writing problems show that the lack of linguistic knowledge is a major problem that ELLs face during writing tasks.

For example, Al-Buainain (2009) investigated areas of difficulty among 40 Arab undergraduate student writers. After analyzing participants' writing scripts, she identified 11 types of usage errors, including inappropriate vocabulary, poor punctuation, and high frequency of grammatical errors. Al-Buainain's data analysis concluded that students' errors were systematic and classifiable, such as difficulties in understanding the notion of verb tense and their inability to properly use tenses such as present or past perfect, which can be seen as a key to help students to solve their writing accuracy problems. She

mentioned that having syntax and semantic knowledge is essential for ELLs in order to communicate accurately through writing, as grammatical errors may influence how the readers perceive students as writers, and how they perceive themselves.

Osman and Abu Bakar's (2009) qualitative research study utilized a content analysis method to examine 27 papers written by Malaysian undergraduate students. The findings revealed that the main problem of pupils was the inappropriate use of grammar and vocabulary. Osman and Abu Bakar mentioned that because of the language problems, students were not able to produce perfect papers. The researchers also investigated the effect of taking a special course on how to write an academic paper on participants' writing. They concluded that providing students an appropriate learning environment is beneficial for the students and helps them reduce their language problems. Students made improvements in organizing, quoting, paraphrasing, and sentence structure.

Similarly, Casanave and Hubbard (1992), in a comparison of native and non-native-English speakers, used a questionnaire to ask 85 university faculty members to judge the writing problems of their doctoral students. Students were from humanities/social sciences and science/technology fields. The results showed that faculty members perceived that non-native students had more problems writing when compared to native speakers, mostly in the areas of correct punctuation, spelling, the accuracy of grammar, and appropriateness of vocabulary. However, they considered global features of writing as more important than local features of writing and in evaluation they gave a higher rating to global features rather than local features. Global features consisted of

developing ideas and the quality of the content and local features were grammatical accuracy, punctuation, and spelling.

In another study, Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008) explored four Chinese-speaking graduate students' experience writing literature reviews for their academic papers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by constant comparison analysis. According to these students, their writing challenges were mainly linguistic problems, especially regarding vocabulary, grammar, and accuracy at the sentence level. The participants in this research considered that English literature reviews are similar to research reviews in Chinese and, in fact, they experienced a positive transfer from their first language (L1) into the second language (L2).They mentioned that they knew how to organize a paragraph and develop an idea, but their main problems were lack of syntax and semantic knowledge.

Hirano (2014) also reported grammar and vocabulary as the most common language issues affecting ELLs' writing in a U.S.-based college program. The participants in Hirano's study were seven non-native speaker refugee students from four different countries, and data for study were derived from interviews, observations, and written documents. Hirano states that struggling with the appropriate use of grammar and vocabulary caused these students to be unable to write at the college level expectations, and they needed a supportive environment to cope with their writing difficulties.

The aforementioned studies show that ELLs encounter difficulties mostly with the appropriate use of grammar and word choice. Ultimately, the "ability to communicate cannot be fulfilled unless the grammar is there, in the competence of the writer" (Al-Buainain, 2009, p. 19). Many researchers argue that ELLs need to develop an appropriate

knowledge of language use to improve their writing abilities, as linguistic accuracy has a significant role in the quality of a written text. Although all these researchers emphasize linguistic knowledge as a major problem area for ELLs, other research indicates that many ELLs' writing problems stem from their cultural background, which I explain in the next section.

Cultural Differences

Inadequate linguistic knowledge may not be the only factor impeding language learners' ability to become competent writers. Cultural differences can be another challenge for ELLs. Kramsch (1998) states that culture is:

> membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common social imaginings. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting. These standards are what is generally called their "culture." (p. 10)

Further, Kramsch claims that there is a close relationship between language and culture, and mentions that language is "bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (p. 3). It is obvious that any culture has distinct features that are different from other cultures, and these differences cause communication problems. The notion of culture-specific thought patterns introduced by Kaplan (1966) has spawned several studies of ELLs' writing. Kaplan notes that different ways of thinking have a significant impact on writing style and, consequently, the way that ELLs choose to convey their purposes and thoughts. For example, he points out that Asian students often write circularly, whereas Western students write linearly. In other words, Asian students often take the indirect

approach to an argument and write their main points at the end of their writing (Krampetz, 2005). The following section discusses some of the related studies in this area.

Findings from Li's (2007) qualitative case study about the construction of writer identity in a Canadian academic setting showed that the native-culture rhetorical style of an undergraduate Chinese student affected her journal writing. What the student wrote was different from the host culture's expectations. She wrote only gradual details although she was expected to write more directly to the point. She did not mention the main points at the beginning and took an indirect approach in her writing. For example, when she was supposed to write about the reasons that one of her friends chose to study in Canada rather than another country, she started with some explanation about her friend's birthday, home town, her family, and her five cousins. After writing two paragraphs about her friend's background, in the third paragraph she discussed the main reasons that why her friend had chosen a Canadian university for study.

In another qualitative study, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) examined four international graduate students' writing in an academic context. Analysis of written assignments of participants revealed the influence of cultural differences in students' writing style. For example, quoting extensively, reproducing large sections of text verbatim instead of reflecting on the topic, choosing safer and neutral topics when given a choice of topic to write on, and not giving different views in their papers are some of the international students' writing styles that do not correspond well to the Western style of academic writing.

Similarly, Gao (2012) explored the impact of three Chinese graduate students' native culture and classroom cultures on their academic English writing in an American university. After analyzing data, which were collected through semi-structured interviews, Gao's study identified the impact of L1 culture on students' academic English writing, which included different word choices. For example, one of the participants used the term "people" many times while the professor wanted her to change the term to "individuals." These differences show the influence of Chinese culture on the writing style of the participants, which encourages individuals to think of people in a collective sense and to favour community benefits more than individual interests. Gao states that the cultural differences between the East, which values collectivism, and the West, which values individualism, were obvious in the students' writing.

In another related study, Krampetz (2005) attempted to explore eight international undergraduate students' writing development at Stanford University. An analysis of interview transcripts, writing samples, and survey responses showed that cultural factors such as international students' different beliefs and perspectives about writing had the most significant effect on the development of their writing. Krampetz states that it is important to know that international students can use their own cultural resources to bridge the gap between academic expectations and personal preferences to develop their writing competency at the university level.

Such studies show the existence of culturally bound writing styles. Their findings indicate that Eastern students may have difficulties meeting Western academic expectations due to the existence of different cultural features. Social and cultural knowledge can be viewed as an essential competency for ELLs as the lack of this

awareness leads them to failure in representing appropriate written forms. As mentioned earlier, different cultures may have different thinking patterns and writing traditions that affect the writing performance of ELLs. In the next section, I explore how the lack of critical thinking ability, which is often approached differently in different cultures (Vyncke, 2012), may lead to another challenge for ELLs in academic writing.

Critical Thinking

Students at the graduate level are expected to produce in-depth content and write with intellect, maturity, and sophistication. In this research, critical thinking is based on Chance's (1986) definition of "the ability to analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems" (p. 6). The ability to think critically is a required ability to write in Western academic contexts. Akindele (2008) argues that "the ability of the writer to evaluate and argue is very crucial; and argumentation requires critical thinking, which can be seen as the product of individualism and identity, which graduate students are expected to demonstrate in their writing" (p. 7). Likewise, Brace (2008) points out that "across all sections of the academy, students' capacity for critical thinking is generally considered to be a core and necessary academic skill" (p. 4). Critical thinking, in these views, is considered as a tool to help language learners to write reasonably and proficiently. In the next section, I discuss some of the related studies in this area.

The inability of graduate students to think critically may lead them to fail in producing acceptable papers based on academic setting criteria. Ismail, Hussin, and Darus (2012) researched 16 undergraduate Malaysian students who were taking a compulsory English proficiency course. They analyzed the students' writing problems,

utilizing survey and interviews methods, and found that the students' inability to think critically impeded their ability to produce high-quality academic texts. Ismail et al. define critical thinking as the ability to develop ideas, produce writing that is relevant to the topic, fulfil the purpose of writing, and produce meaningful content. The researchers attributed the participants' difficulties in these areas to their lack of critical thinking.

Likewise, Osman and Abu Bakar (2009) conducted a study to investigate writing problems of undergraduate students at medical field. The researchers utilized content analysis to analyze 100 non-native students' academic papers in an English proficiency course. Osman and Abu Bakar explained that one of the major problems that students faced was their inability to think critically in terms of organization, relevant content, and idea development, which in turn led them to produce weak texts.

In addition, the inability of graduate students to think critically can cause them to encounter difficulties when they evaluate literature. Akindele (2008) examined the writing problems of postgraduate students at the University of Botswana in Africa. He interviewed six graduate students who had completed their projects and examined the literature review section of 30 completed Master's theses. The results revealed that most of the students were unable to evaluate the relevant literature critically. For example, they could not show the existing gaps in the previous research, show insight and an awareness of differing arguments, and could not link the review to the purpose of their study.

Likewise, results from Vyncke's (2012) interviews with three postgraduate international students regarding their difficulties during academic writing assignments suggested that students had trouble writing critically. The problematic areas were "insufficient subject knowledge, lack of authorial 'voice' and lastly, the restrictive

conventions and canonical structure of the essay genre which can inhibit and limit the student writers' expression" (Vyncke, 2012, p. 52). Vyncke reported that participants' lack of knowledge about the given topic affected their ability to present an argument and led them to rely on other writers' views rather than their own. Participants in Vyncke's study mentioned that they were not certain about the meaning of critical thinking, they did not know how it looks in a text, and they were not sure that they implemented it correctly. Vyncke also pointed out that cultural differences hinder critical thinking.

Stapleton's (2002) study of Japanese university students also assessed their critical thinking ability in writing. The research was conducted in Hokkaido University and the participants were divided into two groups, a treatment group including 46 students and a control group with 23 students. The treatment group received special critical thinking instruction. Data were collected through interviews, questionnaire, and writing samples of the participants. The findings indicated that both groups showed a level of critical thinking in their writing tasks and the treatment group showed improvement after receiving instructions. However, the quality of participants' critical thinking was better when they wrote about familiar topics. Stapleton concluded that, contrary to the claims of some researchers who argued that Asian cultures lack encouragement to development critical thinking, Japanese students in his study showed a level of critical thinking and the ability to improve in this skill.

These studies suggest that the ability to think critically is another important element in ELLs' writing proficiency. Some of the studies suggested that students from outside of Western academia had difficulties with the concept of critical thinking, as cultural differences affected this ability (Vyncke, 2012), while other studies showed that

Asian culture encouraged critical thinking and students from these countries showed this ability in their writing (Stapleton, 2001). However, Akindele's (2008) study found that "most of the graduate students lack critical thinking skills and they were unable to assert their identity and voice in their writing" (p. 17). At the graduate level, ELLs need to sharpen their critical thinking skills in order to produce high-quality essays, theses, or research papers. Critical thinking in this case means that they must be able to show their insights and their deep thoughts in their writing. They must be able to argue, discuss, and evaluate other literature and show their rationale and purpose in their writing. They need to think critically to develop an argument in a text and show their ability to discuss and organize their thoughts in order to establish their writing identities in an English language context. Critical thinking and identity are two important parts of academic writing.

ELLs and Writing Identity

By interacting with the new language learning process and context, ELLs may develop new beliefs and thoughts that may lead them to construct a new writing identity. Shen's (1989) research on ELLs' writing identities showed that while language learners learn how to write, they also develop a new identity that is influenced by both their home and the host culture. Ivanič (1998) declared that "writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped subject possibilities for self-hood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody" (p. 32).Writing in a new academic setting, ELLs need to adapt to values of the dominant culture. Burgess and Ivanič (2010) argue that "writing demands in educational settings are also identity demands" (p. 228). Norton (1997) defines identity as "how people understand their relationship to the world,

how that relationship is constructed across time and space, [and] how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p. 410). Likewise, Collier (2010) states that "through literate practices (i.e., reading, writing, drawing, and other forms of interaction with multimodal texts), one draws on identities and constructs new ones" (p. 148) and Street (2003) argues that "the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being" (p. 2). In this way, writing is not utilized only to express ideas and thoughts, but also to express self. Investigating writing identity development, how it is revealed in second language writing, and the influential elements on writing identity have been the focus of many studies. I discuss some of these studies in the following section.

Adapting to the cultural and educational expectations of second language contexts is crucial in developing ELLs' writing identities. Li's (2007) qualitative case study explored the construction of writer identity of an ELL undergraduate student in a Canadian academic setting. The data were collected through field notes and interview recordings. Li's findings indicated that "the notions of culture, identity, and beliefs are tightly interwoven" and "they also work together in the reconstruction of an ESL writer's identity, incorporating multiple influences and intentions" (p. 60). He explains how participants gradually made progress in their writing competency and reshaped their writing identity to suit Western academic expectations by developing their insights about differences and similarities between Eastern and Western education systems and cultures.

Similarly, Fernsten's (2008) case study explored how a student from Korea in a writing course at an American university struggled to construct her writer identity. Fernsten explains how the student's frustration and feelings of marginalization led her to

be convinced she was "not a good writer" (p. 44). According to Fernsten, her participant developed a negative writing identity as the result of omitting elements such as race, ability, and class from her personal writing identity.

A number of personal experiences and backgrounds influence transitions from L1 to L2 writing identities. Hirvela and Belcher (2001) analyzed samples of writing and interviews of three non-native graduate students and explored the difficulties that they experienced in transition from L1 writing identity to L2 writing identity. They conclude that the learners' backgrounds and L1 writing identity had significant influence on their new voice and identity in the second language. They state that variables such as native language, culture, and prior professional writing experience of language learners should be considered in discussions of identity construction.

Moreover, studies show that ELLs' writing identities shift while they experience writing in academic contexts. Gao et al.'s (2015) longitudinal study examined the identity development of about 1,000 undergraduate students from five universities in China. The study investigated the changes of seven identity categories: positive self-confidence, negative self-confidence, subtractive, additive, productive, split, and zero change. Data were collected through a questionnaire, interviews, learning diaries, and class observations. Results showed the changes of all identity categories and positive self-confidence change as the most prominent throughout the 4-year study period.

Similarly, Ivanič and Camps's (2001) study of six non-native graduate students from Mexico in England explored how these students represented themselves as the writers and constructed their new identity in a Western academic context. The researchers analyzed verb tense, sentence structure, vocabulary choice, and punctuation in

participants' assignments based on Halliday's functional grammar. Participants and one of the instructors also were interviewed. Findings showed that "writing always conveys a representation of the self of the writer" (Ivanič and Camps, 2001, p. 3). The participants tried to position themselves as members of the academic setting by utilizing specific vocabulary and showing different voices in their texts. For example, Ivanič and Camps discussed that when an author writes "she" to refer to people in general, the writer shows her or his feminist view and her or his tendency to a specific social group.

Likewise, Abasi et al.'s (2006) case study explored the writing identity construction and awareness of five graduate students at a Canadian university. Participants were from Iran, Korea, Honduras, and Mexico. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews, text-based interviews, and by reviewing the participants' drafts and final papers. Abasi et al. divided the participants into two groups: less experienced students who did not have writing experience in a Canadian academic setting, and more experienced students with a rich background of writing. Findings indicated that participants in the more experienced group were significantly aware of their writing identities and showed it through authorial and privileged identities. For example, these participants "consciously tried to portray themselves as inter textually knowledgeable about the topics of their papers through referencing and citation as they perceived this to be valued in the context of writing" (Abasi et al., 2006, p. 107). In contrast, the less experienced group showed little awareness of textual identities. The researcher concluded that instructors need to emphasize the social aspect of writing in their courses, and "make students conscious of the fact that successful writing is simultaneously about presenting domain knowledge and representing self along the lines

of disciplinary expectations" (Abasi et al., 2006, p. 113). The researchers argue that the lack of awareness about identity construction in academic writing can lead to plagiarism. ELLs need to be aware about the social context and construct appropriate writing identities in order to be successful writers.

Further, Lea and Street's (2006) ethnographic research explored the topic of students writing in higher education. The study included interviews with 47 undergraduate students and 13 staff members from universities. Samples of students' writing were also analyzed. Lea and Street approached data based on an academic literacies perspective that considered the importance of knowledge making within a specific context, power and authority relationships, and writing identity. The researchers examined how students and staff understand academic literacies and what type of problems students have while writing in the academic setting. Results from staff interviews revealed that the most important elements for good writing are clarity, syntax, punctuation, layout, and argument. Findings also showed that students had difficulty understanding the requirements for academic writing for various courses and contexts. Lea and Street reported that "many of the difficulties they experienced with writing arose from the conflicting and contrasting requirements for writing on different courses and from the fact that these requirements were frequently left implicit" (2006, p.160). Participants also showed their anxiety about negative feedback and plagiarism. The participants expressed their confusion about referencing and they had trouble understanding the relationship between "acknowledging the source of the text and acknowledging the authority of the text" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 168). They felt that they

did not have something to write from their own views. In this way, their writing identities were affected negatively in the academic setting.

Burke (2010) focused on the construction of writing identity by six Korean students writing at the undergraduate and graduate levels at an American university. The study's four sources of data were interviews, academic papers, process logs, and a map of social influences. Utilizing meta discourse analysis, findings indicated that multiple writing identities were constructed. Elements such as previous writing practices and writing in L1 influenced the participants' writing identity construction. Burke states that while writing, Korean students "tended to look back at what they had done before and to apply Korean writings skills and ideas about writing in their English academic writing" (2010, p. 164). He mentioned that although the transition from L1 to L2 has advantages, the different cultural and social expectations of the Western academic context also led to participants' negative experiences during this transition.

These studies show some influential elements on constructing writing identities, such as culture, L1, awareness about constructing writing identities, confusion about the meaning of academic literacies, the effects of the linguistic features, and unsupportive academic environments. Such research indicates that ELLs encounter evolution and reconstruction of their writing identity while practicing their writing competency in the academic context in a second language. Being aware of the evolution of writing identity can be helpful for ELLs, as this awareness may help ELLs emotionally during a confusing period while they experience the evolution of their writing identities in the second language. Moreover, this awareness helps them to establish strong and ideal writing identities when they write in academic contexts.

Helpful Strategies and Learning Settings

Research on ELLs, their writing difficulties, and their writing identities suggest new pedagogies may help ELLs become successful writers in the second language. As Shen (1989) articulates,

> Looking back, I realize that the process of learning to write in English is, in fact, a process of creating and defining a new identity, and balancing it with the old identity. The process of learning English composition would have been easier if I have realized this earlier and consciously sought to compare the two different identities required by the two writing systems from two different cultures. (p. 466)

Being aware of influences on language proficiency can be a first step to help ELLs overcome their learning difficulties. Cadman (1997), in research on international students' thesis writing, states that establishing a context that helps students to express a personal voice has a valuable pedagogical impact. She found that in such contexts, "a reflexive, personal composing process can help international postgraduates to build a bridge between the internal dialogue of self-review which students exchanging cultures, must experience and the external challenges presented by the new academic environment" (p. 12). The improvement of teaching methods through developing the ability of error analysis by students, utilizing different sources, focusing on practicing writing instead of learning about writing, increasing students' level of critical thinking, and using synthesis as an important reading-to-write task in L2 writing are other valuable pedagogies mentioned by researchers (Al-Buainain, 2009; Marzban & Jalili, 2014; Zhao & Hirvela, 2015). In the following section I discuss some of the research in this area.

Marzban and Jalili (2014), researching 60 Iranian EFL learners, investigated the effect of teaching students how to ask questions as a way of thinking critically and to improve their problem solving while writing in English. The researchers defined problem solving in writing as the behaviour that participants show to find ways to convert their thoughts into English written form. The participants were from a language institute in Tehran and the researchers divided them into two groups: a control group and an experimental group. Drawing on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (cognitive domain), the researchers taught the experimental group how to ask questions about the content of their textbook, and how to do problem solving while writing in English to foster their critical thinking skills. The results from the critical thinking questionnaire, the independent t-test, and the post-test after treatment showed that the level of critical thinking in terms of learning how to ask questions and the problem solving in writing increased in the experimental group compared to the control group. This finding suggests that improving the teaching and learning environment is an important element that can enhance ELLs' writing development.

Likewise, Zhao and Hirvela's (2015) study of two undergraduate Chinese students showed how choosing an appropriate writing task could help ELLs improve their writing abilities. They pointed out that writing academic syntheses is an opportunity to understand the connection between reading and writing. Data were collected through drafts of the students' synthesis papers, think-aloud retrospective protocols, and interviews. Data were analyzed based on a theoretical model of discourse synthesis. In data related to think-aloud, the researchers looked at how participants used three types of reading strategies, namely: content strategies, function/feature strategies, and rhetorical

strategies. Findings suggested that one of the participants who had a better understanding of the connection between reading and writing, and who utilized reading strategies effectively, produced better syntheses. The researchers concluded that participants' understanding of the relation between reading and writing is very crucial in their text production and that "L2 writing teachers need to present a comprehensive task representation of synthesis to L2 students and explicitly address the roles of source use in classroom instruction" (Zhao & Hirvela, 2015, p. 236). This underscores the importance of writing practices in improving ELLs' writing abilities.

What these studies imply is that appropriate teaching methodology, strategies, and writing practices that instructors apply in writing classrooms can help ELLs develop their writing abilities in the academic setting. In this research, by devising various questions I explored the different strategies that the three research participants utilized to overcome their writing difficulties. I also explored their views and thoughts about the settings and conditions that could help them in their academic writing practices.

Summary

This literature review suggests that educational research on language learners' writing problems reveals some significant features, such as cultural matters, linguistic knowledge, and critical thinking at the undergraduate and graduate level. Moreover, studies focused on the writing identity construction of ELLs indicate that ELLs experience reconstruction of their writing identities and are influenced by different elements of English academic contexts such as culture, L1, awareness about constructing writing identities, confusion about the meaning of academic literacies, the effects of the linguistic features, and unsupportive academic environments. However, research on

writing difficulties and the latter's effects on writing identity is an area of growing interest; as Gao et al. (2015) state, "L2 identity development in EFL settings in the context of globalization deserves broader research attention" (p. 137). Therefore, this study sought to explore writing challenges and their effect on reshaping writing identities among non-native speakers at the graduate level.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

This study explored the writing challenges and writing identities of non-native speakers of English in a graduate-level Education program at an Ontario university. Data were collected through a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and post-interview questions and then analyzed through reading, coding, description, thematic development, representation, and interpretation. The following section discusses the research design, research process, reflexivity, credibility, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

Qualitative research focuses on "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2015, p.4). The purpose of qualitative research is "to learn from the participants in a setting or a process the way they experience it, the meanings they put on it and how they interpret what they experience" (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 28). This study is also grounded in an interpretive methodology. This interpretation includes "advancing personal views, making comparisons between the findings and the literature, and suggesting limitations and future research" (Creswell, 2015, p. 261), which means that the researcher does not have any prior hypothesis, but makes sense and interprets meaning from the findings.

Data in qualitative research act as an evidence. This evidence "is in the form of accounts people have given of the experience" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). A survey is one of the common forms of collecting data for qualitative research. According to Jansen (2010), in contrast to quantitative surveys, the qualitative survey "is the study of diversity (not distribution) in a population" (p. 3). A qualitative survey "does not aim at establishing frequencies, means or other parameters but at determining diversity of some

topic of interest within a given population" (Jansen, 2010, p. 2). In survey design, the

researcher investigates participants' opinions and characteristics, utilizing questionnaires

or interviews as two forms of collecting data (Creswell, 2015; Dabić & Stojanov, 2014;

McDonald, 2014). According to Creswell, a questionnaire is "a form used in a survey

design that participants in a study complete and return to the researcher" (2015, p. 385).

Creswell also explains that in "qualitative survey interviews, an interviewer asks open-

ended questions without response options and listens to and records the comments of the

interviewee" (2015, p. 385).The method of survey data collection, whether interviews or

questionnaires, must be designed in a way that can help the researcher collect data

completely and accurately. In this study, I chose survey design, as I wanted to know the

participants' opinions about their writing challenges, the evolution of their writing

identities, and the ways they cope with the challenges through their own lenses. I thought

that a questionnaire and follow-up interviews are suitable ways to answer my research

questions. In this study, I first created the questionnaire and then conducted interviews.

After doing each interview, I sent some follow-up questions to participants by email. The

following section explains each of these data collection methods in greater detail.

     A questionnaire is a series of written questions, which are closed ended or open-

ended (Brace, 2013; Creswell, 2015). A questionnaire is perceived as an efficient way in

data collection without taking a lot of time (Given, 2008). According to Brace (2013), a

questionnaire plays a vital role in survey processes and the type of questions within the

questionnaire affects other survey processes. In this study, I sent a questionnaire

including nine open-ended questions to the participants via email. Compared to closed

ended questions, open-ended questions give the researcher an opportunity to explore

participants' reasoning and comments in greater detail (Creswell, 2015). I sent the

questionnaire first to give participants space and time to think. Then from their responses

to the questionnaire, I devised more questions to discuss more details with participants

when I interviewed them. In addition, after they completed the questionnaire, I had some

written documents to see how the participants presented themselves as writers. After

collecting data through the questionnaire for further clarification, explanation, and a

better understanding of the participants' answers, I conducted one-on-one interviews with

all the participants.

Interviewing is a common approach for data collection in qualitative research

(Fernsten, 2008; Gao et al., 2015; Giroir, 2014; Li, 2007). A one-on-one interview is a

popular approach in which "the researcher asks to and record answers from only one

participant in the study at a time" (Creswell, 2015, p. 217). According to DiCicco-Bloom

and Crabtree (2006), semi-structured interviews are "generally organised around a set of

predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue

between interviewer and interviewees" (p. 315). Individual interviews help researchers to

explore deeply personal matters of the participants while group interviews prevent

participants from talking freely (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This kind of

interview is flexible and allows the researcher to elaborate on information and pursue an

idea in more details (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

I conducted this type of interview as I found it more convenient for participants to

articulate their thoughts and experiences freely in the absence of other participants. In this

way, it was easier to maintain participants' confidentiality and privacy, as well as arrange

an appropriate time for all of them. I developed some open-ended questions based on the

participants' responses to the questionnaire and asked more questions that emerged from the conversation with the participants. The focus of the discussions was on writing difficulties, the influences of difficulties on students' feelings and emotions, and the ways they express their thoughts in the written forms.

Data analysis in qualitative research is inductive, which means "going from the particular and detailed data to general codes and themes" (Creswell, 2015, p. 236). For this study, six steps in the process of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data mentioned by Creswell (2015) were utilized to analyze the data. Consequently, the data in this study were limited to oral and written reports rather than any direct observation. As a whole, according to Caelli, Ray, and Mill (2003), qualitative research must address "the theoretical positioning of the researcher, the congruence between methodology and methods, the strategies to establish rigor, and the analytic lens through which the data are examined" (p. 9). I established these key areas through my whole research. I chose the qualitative research design, a questionnaire, and interviews to collect data as these methodologies and the methods had the potential to provide answers to my research questions.

Through the questionnaire, I gave participants the opportunity to think deeply about their writing challenges, and their responses to the questions, which provided me a written document for more exploration of their difficulties. In addition, by interviewing, the participants had more time to discuss their issues freely and in greater detail.

After collecting the data and doing the analysis, I found several themes such as inability to establish a strong writing identity in the academic context, vocabulary knowledge as the main challenge of the graduate participants, as well as feeling

frustration and disappointment during the master's program, which I discuss further in chapter 4.

Site and Participant Selection

The participant selection was done through purposeful sampling, as Creswell (2015) defines it: "In purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand center phenomenon" (p. 205). As the purpose of the study was to understand about non-native speakers, the sampling strategy was homogeneous sampling, which means the researcher chose certain people with common characteristics. The sample size for a qualitative survey should be small and "represent[s] the diversity of the phenomenon under study within the target population" (Jansen, 2010, p. 6). Accordingly, I chose three people among graduate students from the Master of Education program at an Ontario university as the participants. I chose participants who met the following criteria: (a) Participants must be from different countries to see how different backgrounds and languages affect their writing practices in a Western academic context; and (b) participants must be at the end of their program to have enough writing experience in an academic context to talk about their challenges and difficulties and provide sufficient data for the research.

At first, I contacted five graduate students whom I knew were not native speakers of English and all of them were at the end of their Master of Education program. I sent them an invitation-consent letter, which included all the information about the research purpose and process. Three of the prospective participants signed the invitation-consent letter and expressed their interest in participating in my research. Table 1 shows the profiles of the three research participants.

Table 1

Participants' Profiles

Participant	Gender	Age	Country	Previous Education	Pursuing Degree	Specialization
Ramon	Male	41	Colombia	BA Law/ MA History	Master of Education	Administration & Leadership
Banoo	Female	46	Kenya	BSc & BA Adult Education	Master of Education	Teaching, Learning, and Development
Palma	Female	48	Nigeria	BA English & History	Master of Education	Social and Cultural Contexts of Education

After I received the signed invitation-consent letters, I started to collect my data.

Data Collection

The data for this research were collected through a questionnaire, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and follow up questions after interviews. Initially a questionnaire that included nine open-ended questions (Appendix A) was sent to the participants via email. I developed my own questionnaire based on existing concepts in the literature such as ELLs' opinions about the influential elements on the academic writing, their likes and dislikes about writing, and their difficulties, challenges, and changes while writing in academic environment (Ismail et al., 2012; Krampetz, 2005; Li, 2007). My own experience as a non-native speaker was the other source for my questionnaire. I also drew from Boice (1990, p. 34), who has written about writing in academic contexts and has developed provoking questions about writers' identities. As the focus of my research was on graduate students' writing challenges, writing identities, and writing strategies, I devised questions that would answer my research questions. For example, by asking different questions such as whether participants find any changes in their way of thinking after learning English, how they think about themselves as a writer, or comparing their writing experience in their first language with the second language, I tried to explore their writing identities in the academic writing setting. Within 3 weeks, I received the participants' replies. I read their answers carefully and prepared more questions for the interview.

For further exploration and clarification, I then conducted one-on-one interviews (Appendix B). I divided the interview questions into two parts. The questions for the first part were based on participants' responses to the questionnaire and the second part

included new questions. Therefore, the first part of the interview questions was different for each participant and the type and number of questions depended on how the participants answered the questionnaire. The purpose of this part was to look for more clarification and explanation for what the participants previously mentioned on the questionnaire. The new part was mostly focused on participants' writing identity and I used some questions from the questionnaire and interview questions from similar existing research in this area (Abasi et al., 2006; Saha, 2014).

I contacted each participant separately and planned a convenient place and time for each of them to do the interview. I recorded all the interviews. Moreover, I conducted the post-interview questions and sent some questions for each participant by email for more clarification and explanation about what they expressed in interviews. The follow-up questions were different for each participant and the type and number of questions again were dependent on their responses in the interviews. For example, the follow-up questions that I asked Ramon and Banoo were concentrated more on their previous writing experience in their home country, while I asked Palma to explain more about her writing challenges in the academic context.

After receiving and transcribing all the data, I read the transcriptions carefully, made notes for each of them, and summarized them under six main themes: academic writing challenges; ideal writing identities; autobiographical preferred writing practices; comparing writing practices in L1 and L2; comparing L2 writing practices in home country and Canada; and possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context. I summarized themes in a table to be prepared for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis adopted an inductive approach via a six-step process of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data proposed by Creswell (2015): reading, coding, description, thematic development, representation, and interpretation. In the analysis process, I prepared data for analysis. This step included organizing the data by types (e.g., interviews and questionnaire answers) and using manual analysis for converting the recorded interviews into text. Next, I explored general themes from the data and coded them through "the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (Creswell, 2015, p. 242). Coding is also defined as "the analysis strategy many qualitative researchers employ in order to help them locate key themes, patterns, ideas, and concepts that may exist within their data" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 349). At first, all possible concepts were extracted from the data and then data were classified into low-level and high-level categories (Corbin &Strauss, 2008; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Richards & Morse, 2013). For example, I found several low-level categories and high-level categories.

Low-level categories were teaching methods, easy English, keeping national identity, differences between writing English in Canada and home country, not having academic writing experience in the first language, using advanced vocabulary to show the strong ability in writing as a type of writing strategy, having negative attitudes toward freedom in Canada, and conflicting meanings between similar words in L1 and L2. High-level categories or the most obvious themes in my research were lack of appropriate lexical knowledge as the biggest challenge in academic writing, preferring an understandable writing style such as not including too difficult vocabularies, reading

extensively as a helpful strategy for better writing, inability to establish a strong writing identity, and inability to transfer the writing abilities from L1 to L2 due to the writing challenges. I summarized the high-level categories under the six main headings named academic writing challenges, ideal writing identities, autobiographical preferred writing practices, comparing writing practices in L1 and L2, comparing L2 writing practices in home country and Canada, and possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context.

  I draw also on Ivanič's (2004) four-layered view of language, which includes text at its centre, and cognitive process, event, and sociocultural and political context as the other layers in this model. For example, Ramon expressed that because he did not have enough political and legal information about Canada, he was worried about the reaction of Canadian society toward his writing about such topics and he was not sure about the writing identity perceived by native speakers based on his writing. In fact, the cognitive process in his mind seemed to directly affect the way he writes.

  Ivanič's (1998) four aspects of identity—namely autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for self-hood—were also utilized for analysis of the data. For example, all the participants could develop a kind of writing competency at the end of their master's program and based on the different aspects of the context of their writing practices such as getting feedback, they established the fourth aspect of their writing identity, named "possibilities for self-hood."

  I presented the findings in a table (see Table 2 in chapter 4), which I found to be an appropriate and helpful method to represent the findings of this research, and prepared a narrative discussion to report the findings. Finally, I interpreted and made sense of the

findings based on my conceptual framework, my personal experiences, and comparison with similar studies.

Establishing Credibility

To enhance the quality of the data, I used a member checking strategy after collecting data through the questionnaire and interviews. Creswell (2015) points out that "Member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (p. 259). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is an important element in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility is equivalent to internal validity which confirms that the research measures what is intended (Shenton, 2004). For establishing the credibility of the data, I returned the findings to the participants and asked them about the accuracy of the results. This included asking participants about different aspects of the study, such as "whether the description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate to include, and if the interpretations are fair and representative" (Creswell, 2015, p. 259). This process was also an opportunity for the participants to change any ideas and to indicate data they did not wish to share.

After the participants completed the questionnaire, I organized and analyzed their answers. As I was looking for the participants' writing challenges, the effects of those challenges on their writing identities, and the strategies that they utilized to overcome their difficulties, I divided the data from the questionnaire into three sections. Then I summarized their answers under the three sections, named: writing challenges, writing identities, and writing strategies. I read the participants' answers and based on the content I wrote them in the related section. Then I sent the results to them to confirm the accuracy

of the data. Within 2 weeks, I received the participants' replies and they confirmed the

accuracy of the data from the questionnaire. After collecting data through the interviews,

I prepared a transcript for each interview and sent them to the participants by email. I

asked each participant to check the transcript for accuracy of the data. In this way, they

also had the opportunity to modify their responses and make any changes they wished.

Within 3 weeks, I received participants' replies with some modification and changes in

the interview transcripts and further explanation as the answers for post-interview

questions.

After analyzing the data, I also sent the main themes from the findings to the

participants to check my interpretation and understanding of the data. They agreed with

the accuracy of the rest of the data and confirmed the main theme and categories.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is related to the researcher's knowledge and background that affect the

research. As Berger (2015) notes, "Questions about reflexivity are part of a broader

debate about ontological, epistemological, and axiological components of the self, inter

subjectivity and the colonization of knowledge" (p. 2). Researchers' personal history,

assumptions, and presuppositions shape their research interests and motivate them to

investigate a particular topic.

My previous experience as a Master's student struggling with writing a thesis in

English in my home country, Iran, and my current experience as a Master's student in a

Western academic setting, struggling with writing assignments and papers, allows me to

relate to the writing challenges of ELLs. When I was at the beginning of my studies at a

Canadian university, I thought that my previous writing experience such as writing a

thesis in English language could be helpful for me. However, when I started to write my papers, I found that there are some differences between writing in Western academic settings and my home country, Iran.

I found that in Iran we start writing from the big picture then come to particular points while in the Western setting I should write to the point and be very straightforward. For example, when I started to write my MRP, because I wanted to "write about writing" based on my previous experience, I thought that it would be good to start to write from a bigger picture. Therefore, I started the first paragraph in the introduction section with some explanation about learning a second language and different language skills. Then I came to the topic of "writing" but my supervisor asked me to start directly from "writing" and she said that from my explanation it seems that my research is about language learning and not about writing. She mentioned that I must write in a way that the reader understands from the outset that the research is about writing. Street (2006) states that "The literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as varied social practices associated with different communities" (p. 368). I found that writing is an activity that is dependent on the context and culture, and I think a successful writer is a person who is aware of such a relationship.

My lack of proficiency in writing in English, my lack of linguistic knowledge, my inability to think critically, and sociocultural differences were other inadequacies that I felt about myself. These differences and insufficiencies cause me to feel that I cannot present myself as I like and my writing identity is not an ideal one. However, gradually and continuously, through different resources, I overcame some of my difficulties and I became a better writer in the Western academic setting.

Therefore, I was very interested in finding out challenges of other students like myself and exploring how they deal with their writing difficulties. I would like to know how they make the transition from L1writing to L2 writing and how the Western academic setting affects them and their writing identities. Discovering their feelings, emotion, progress, and achievements were my other interests. I thought that I could share my experience with the participants and add to discussion about the ELLs' writing challenges and writing identities. My experience as a graduate student could help me to understand participants' thoughts and views better. However, being inside the study could be considered as a disadvantage, and my position in the research prevented me to see things that an outsider might see.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the research, an application form for the ethics review of "Research Involving Human Participants" was filled out and sent to an Ontario university's Research Ethics Board (REB), along with the questionnaire and a summary about the interviews. The Ontario university's REB granted clearance and the file number of the certificate is 15-108. Then, invitational letters and consent forms were forwarded to the participants by email. In addition, I informed participants of the purpose of the study, shared information with them, maintained confidentiality, was respectful, and protected their anonymity. Although I mentioned in the consent letter that I would do my best to safeguard participants' privacy and I would not share their information on the main MRP report, one of the participants who previously expressed interest in participating in the study did not sign the consent letter, and withdrew from the research

at the beginning. I sent her a thank you email and deleted her name from the list of the participants.

After collecting the primary data through the questionnaire, I made separate folders for each participant's data and assigned them pseudonyms; therefore, even my supervisor did not know the participants' real names. For the interview, I obtained permission and set a convenient time and location for the participants.

I also decided to collect some writing samples from participants with their professors' feedback on them as another source of data, but the participants did not want to share their writing. Therefore, to respect the participants' views and privacy, I omitted this type of data from my research.

After sending follow-up questions after interviews, I received a call from Palma, one of the participants. She explained that she did not have enough time to answer all the questions, therefore I explained that she was free to choose to answer or not, and that there was no obligation to answer all of the questions. To thank the participants, I provided small gifts (gift cards) for each participant.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative study with a survey design including a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and post-interview questions explored ELLs' writing challenges and the effects of such challenges on ELLs' writing identities. Writing strategies, experiences, or environments that helped them overcome their writing difficulties also were investigated.

Chapter 4 presents findings of the research, which are the result of the data collected. This chapter consists of two sections. The first section presents findings, and includes a short introduction to the three research participants, their thoughts and views from their answers to the questionnaire, interviews, and post-interview questions, along with a table that presents a summary of findings. The second section consists of related discussion about the participants' writing challenges and successes, the scrutiny of the effects of challenges on writing identity, and writing strategies and environments that helped the participants to overcome their writing difficulties while writing in the master's program. Ivanič's ideas are interwoven through the analysis. Findings are interpreted based on the theoretical framework of this study, which includes Ivanič's (2004) multilayered view of language comprising the text, cognitive process, event, and sociocultural and political context, and Ivanič's (1998) four aspects of writing identities, including autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for self-hood. However, as the focus of this study is more on the writing identity, during the analysis the primary emphasis is on Ivanič's four aspects of writing identities, while the multilayered view of language receives secondary consideration.

Findings

The participants in this research are three graduate students in the field of Education from an Ontario university. They are from different countries and backgrounds. Two of them have finished their programs recently, and one of them is at the end of her study.

Participants

Ramon[1] is from Colombia, and his first language is Spanish. In his home country, he has been a university professor and already has a master's degree in history. Banoo is from Kenya, and she has a bachelor's degree in engineering from her home country. She also has earned a bachelor's degree in education in Canada. Her first language is Swahili. Palma is from Nigeria, and her first language is Yoruba. She has a bachelor's degree in English and history from her home country. The following sections present data related to Ramon, Banoo, and Palma, respectively.

Ramon. Ramon introduced himself as a university professor in Colombia with a Bachelor of Law, and a Master's degree in History. His Master of Education degree in Canada is his second master's degree. He is 40 years old, and his first language is Spanish. He has many teaching experiences at the university level and writing and publishing articles in different journals.

I found five main themes from his answers to the questionnaire, the interview, and the post-interview questions. These themes are academic writing challenges, ideal academic writing identity, autobiographical preferred writing practices, comparing L1 and L2 writing identities, possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context.

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[1] .I assigned pseudonyms for all participants.

In the following section, I explain all these themes and findings.

Academic writing challenges. In this part, I explain Ramon's difficulties when writing in the academic setting. He explains that he is a poor writer in English because he struggles to find the appropriate vocabularies to express his thoughts. He said that English and Spanish have a lot of common Latin root words but sometimes with completely different and even opposite meaning which adds to his struggles with vocabulary. He noted that his struggles in writing make him feel insecure about what he writes: "I am sure about my thought but insecure about how to express it" (Ramon's interview).

He mentioned that age is a major factor for second language learners, and he wished he could have started learning English earlier to reduce his challenges in the English language. He said that when you are of certain age as an adult and unable to communicate as you are supposed to, then you feel frustration: "I have a lot to say, but the language barrier is a huge, huge problem" (Ramon's questionnaire). He mentioned that he is a newcomer to Canada; therefore, he does not have enough social and political information about the Canadian context, which led him to be concerned about the readers' perceiving of his writing.

Ivanič (2004), in her multilayered model of language, considers the cognitive process and sociocultural and political context of writing as an inseparable part of a text, and it seems that Ramon is aware of the importance of this element in his writing. He expressed his concerns about the thoughts of the readers of his texts, as he feels he does not have enough knowledge about the political context of Canada. This means that the sociocultural context of his writing practices and cognitive process in his mind affected

his text production. Although he mentioned the lack of appropriate vocabulary knowledge as his main difficulty, it seems that he knows that in order to produce a good script; he needs to know about the social and political context of the place (i.e., Canada) where he is writing.

Ideal academic writing identity. In this part, I explain Ramon's views and thoughts about his ideal writing identity and the characteristics of a good writer. He expressed that he wishes he could be understood, and his writing represents and reflects his views and experience and how he perceives other societies and cultures. Because Ramon has been in an academic environment for a long time, he knows several good writers in Spanish. In his opinion, a good writer is a person who can transfer his or her ideas with clarity using simple language, while the writing has enough depth and shows the intelligence of the writer. He pointed out that Enrique Serrano[2] is such a writer:

> I can describe him as a quiet, sensible and above all, friendly simple person. The magic that characterizes Enrique's writing has earned him the comparison with the Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Enrique's writing is easy to read. Nevertheless, the easiness does not imply that his writing lacks depth. (Ramon, questionnaire).

Ramon discussed that a good writer in English is a writer who writes in easy English. He explained that easy English for him is a kind of text for which he would not need to check the dictionary frequently and look up the difficult words to understand it.

It seems that Ramon likes to display a knowledgeable and informative writing identity in the academic setting and show his rational and deep thoughts in his texts. It is

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[2] Enrique Serrano Lopez is a Colombian writer born in Barrancabermeja in 1960. He also is an emeritus professor of International Relations and Political Sciences at Del Rosario University in Bogotá.

evident that he likes to communicate with clarity while simple English is his ideal writing style and he appreciates a writer whose texts are free of any advanced vocabulary. This ideal writing identity may be in contrast with an academic writing identity because in an academic article there is a level of difficulty that the authors need in order to convey the scientific results of their research. Besides, it seems that Ramon's challenges with vocabulary affected his understanding of writing identity.

 Autobiographical preferred writing practices. This section includes Ramon's explanations about what he likes and dislikes about writing. Ramon said that he enjoys writing in Spanish, but as long as he struggles with English vocabulary, he does not always enjoy writing in English. He likes writing if he knows the topic and the best thing about writing for him is that in order to write, he needs to learn about the topic. He also likes writing because it is an opportunity for him to express his thoughts in a deeper way. He reported that what he could say about writing through his life is that most of the time he feels comfortable. As a school student, he used to write not only his assignments but also others' assignments, such as his cousins' assignments and those of friends. He said:

> At the high school, when I was a teenager I felt confident with my writing skills. In fact, among the many reasons why I decided to become a lawyer, being a good writer was among them. Finally, at the graduate level, writing has been more challenging, and the only reason why I feel so is that I had to do it in a different language at an older age. (Ramon, post-interview questions)

It is evident that Ramon enjoys writing about familiar topics, but he feels that writing in an academic setting requires an ability to write about different subjects and students must be prepared to write about any topics. He also looks for clarity and depth in writing

which may be influenced by his background as a lawyer. It seems that he tends to rely on his previous autobiographical self in the new academic setting while those experiences did not match the sociocultural context of his writing practices. It appears that Ramon tries to avoid unfamiliar practices and context.

Comparing writing practices in L1 and L2. This part includes Ramon's views about his writing identity in his first language and English. In Spanish, most of the time Ramon's writing has been academic, and he discussed that fulfilling the requirements for academic publications is not always easy; that sometimes makes writing in Spanish a mechanical task. He mentioned that all the texts that he has written in Spanish are interesting, new, and informative. Answering a question about transferring his writing abilities from a Spanish into English writing context, Ramon explained that it is hard work, and it is not easy for him to write in English as well as in Spanish. He said:

> I have tried. But I found it difficult. I have tried it but it is kind of difficult because ... you write in at least in Spanish it is that the more you say and the more sophisticated you are in the use of language the more reputation you get but in English is totally the contrary, so you have to find the simplest way to say something. The more direct in English you are the better. (Ramon, interview)

He noted that he is a good writer in his first language, and he published several journal articles, and when he was at school in his home country, he mostly wrote essays and reviews of books.

In fact, Ramon pointed out that the differences between writing practices in L1 and L2 prevent him from applying his first language writing ability into the academic setting of the second language. In other words, he did not find his previous writing

practices advantageous in L2 writing, and he could not rely on his previous autobiographical self because of the existing differences between his previous writing practices and writing demands in the new academic setting. That may be one of the reasons that he felt he was not able to establish his ideal writing identity in the Western academic setting. In addition, he noticed that writing from big picture then come to the specific points may not be acceptable in a Canadian academic environment, and he needs to take a direct approach in writing. It seems that he tried to reconstruct his writing identity regarding the discoursal self as he paid attention to demands of his academic writing context. These findings are similar to one of the participants in a study by Li (2007) who came to the same conclusion. She understood that she must write to the point, and there is no need to write unnecessary details.

Possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context. This part includes Ramon's observations about the benefits of learning English and some of his achievements after completing his master's program. He said that learning English as another language enriches his knowledge and he can view and understand several topics from different standpoints. After learning English, Ramon believes that he could develop deeper thought patterns because of reading different theories of various authors. Ramon mentioned that the best thing that helps him improve his writing is to read a lot, and his reading strategies make him feel confident while working on writing tasks. Ramon said that because he reads a lot, he could get various ideas about different topics and generate new ideas, and all of these make writing easier for him. He said that reading a lot and having lots of information about different countries around the world are his strengths that are reflected in his writing. He noted that writing competency is something that takes

time to change and improve and there is no precise formula to use it and become a good writer. He reported that developing his vocabulary, using the dictionary less, reading faster in English, and generating more ideas while he writes are some of his improvements in English as a second language learner. He mentioned that nobody could improve their use of citations and referencing as the APA developers make changes in their instructions and rules every year. He also said that using the translator, the dictionary, and watching and listening to media in English are beneficial for him to overcome his difficulties. It seems that although Ramon had difficulties in his master's program, he tried to improve in some of the areas of the second language such as developing critical thinking skills. In other words, he tried to utilize the social possibilities for selfhood in order to reconstruct a new writing identity.

As a whole, it seems that Ramon has had a challenging experience in his graduate studies in a Western setting, but he was able to develop his writing competency at the end of his master's program in some way. He sees writing as an opportunity to express his ideas and views with more depth. Although he has a very strong academic background and is very interested in writing, he considers himself to be a poor writer in English, and he is not able to transfer his abilities to an English academic setting. In his opinion, one of the greatest strategies that helped him overcome some of his writing difficulties was excessive reading. His biggest challenge in academic writing as he said is the lack of appropriate lexical knowledge, and he pointed out that using simple language is one of the essential characteristics of a good writer. However, this view about writing is very narrow and good writing depends on more important elements than linguistic knowledge. The ability to think critically, and being aware of the sociocultural context of the writing,

are some of these essential elements. Although Ramon showed an understanding of these features, he emphasized lexical knowledge more than any other elements.

Banoo. This section reports findings corresponding to Banoo. She is in her 40s, has an undergraduate degree in adult education from Canada, and has recently completed her courses in the Master of Education of program. Several themes were derived from her responses to the questionnaire, interviews, and post-interview questions. These themes are academic writing challenges, ideal academic writing identity, autobiographical preferred writing practices, comparing L2 writing identity in her home country and Canada, and possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context.

Academic writing challenges. In this section, I review Banoo's writing difficulties in the academic setting. She explained that her main challenges in writing in English are the topic, vocabulary, and expanding her texts. She mentioned that

> Sometimes I may have the topic, but then I could finish that topic in just 100 words, but I am supposed to write 15 pages, so you know having to build the stories sometimes become very hard for me. I struggle because number one again I back to vocabulary. I don't know the right words. Number two it maybe it's something that I may not as I mentioned earlier related to it very easily. That's why it becomes a little hard. Just getting the right words to use and to put down. (Banoo, interview)

She explained that her inability to write enough content sometimes corresponded to her lack of ideas about the topic and sometimes because of her lack of vocabulary knowledge to choose to convert her thoughts to written words.

Like Ramon, Banoo pointed out that lack of lexical knowledge is one of her main difficulties while writing in the academic setting. She also struggles with unfamiliar topics and developing a text. It seems that Banoo also feels tense with unknown context and practices.

Ideal academic writing identity. This part includes Banoo's views about a good writer and her ideal writing identity. In her opinion, being able to write about different topics, having passion about writing, writing in an understandable style, writing with easy vocabulary, and flexibility are characteristics of a good writer. She explained that easy writing for her happens when she does not need to check the dictionary a lot. For example, she introduced her daughter and her niece as two good writers because they write a lot and about everything. She said that she can easily relate to their texts "because the language is not too hard, it's not too easy, you know it's back to the way they write that's why I think they are good writers" (Banoo, interview). She mentioned President Obama as a person who makes his sentences appealing and interesting especially by a good word choice. She discussed that whatever a person writes must be something that the person likes and has passion about, and also considers the audience.

It seems that Banoo likes to represent a flexible writing identity with strong emotion toward writing. This view toward writing may be the result of her life situation as an African immigrant to Canada that causes her to be flexible toward the new community in which she chooses to live. Moreover, like Ramon, Banoo mentioned that a good writer is a writer who writes in simple and understandable language, utilizing easy vocabulary. She also noted the ability to write about different topics, which previously she mentioned as one of her writing challenges, as her ideal writing identity. She also felt

that considering audience as an important feature of a good text, which shows that she may pay attention to other important features while writing, which is more realistic than writing with easy words.

Autobiographical preferred writing practices. In this section, I explain Banoo's views about her likes and dislikes about writing. Banoo mentioned that she does not like to write, and she has never written in her first language. She said that she is a poor writer in English and interested in writing about factual material and likes to write informative texts. She wants her writing to show that the writer has adequate knowledge about the topic and helps the reader gain or develop a greater understanding after reading her texts. She said that she tries to write her personal views and opinions, and she is interested in writing about her religion, home, and work but not interested in writing about her ethnic background.

Banoo's ideas here seem somewhat contradictory. She may have wanted here to express something good and not her real thoughts and views. There was some inconsistency in what she said. For example, she said that she is not interested in showing her African ethnic background in her writing and at the same time, she pointed out that she likes to talk about her religion, home, and work. It is obvious that she is not interested in writing but if she has to write, she prefers to show a knowledgeable, reasonable, and informed writing identity of herself in the academic context.

Comparing L2 writing practices in home country and in Canada. This section includes what Banoo explained about her writing experience in her home country and Canada. She said that there is not too much literature from her first language except some textbooks. Her first language, Swahili, which does not have an alphabet of its own, is used only for social purposes and that the language of work and school is English. She

explained that she is a poor writer and has no experience of writing in her first language; her writing experience in English in her home country was mostly writing essays, which is not different from writing in Canada except that she had to work hard:

> Writing at home was done in my early years of school and because I did not have good writing skills, I needed to put more effort. I was also not exposed to the large number of resources available in Canada. I had limited resources by way of our school or college library and through my teachers. Stories would be told to us in our mother tongue by our parents, religious leaders, administrators, et cetera, and therefore we had to translate to English but with limited vocabulary, writing would be a tough task. (Banoo, interview)

In addition, she reported that her experience in writing at the undergraduate level in Canada was not her ideal one. She had difficulties in understanding academic writing and had to spend lots of time on writing tasks. However, at the graduate level, she said that she became more knowledgeable and was able to improve her writing skills as "there was more emphasis on academic writing at the graduate level and therefore more guidance by professors regarding developing research techniques, creativity, and grammar" (Banoo, post-interview questions).

It seems that Banoo's previous writing experience was beneficial and in other words, her autobiographical self had a positive effect on her writing practices in Canada. It is evident that Banoo, in contrast to Ramon, could rely on her previous writing identity, and she was successful in transferring her background experience in the new academic setting.

Possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context. In this section, I explain how Banoo could use social possibilities for selfhood as one of the important

aspects of writing identity. She pointed out that her writing competency changed over time because of different factors such as reading a lot, peers' feedback, professors' comments, and getting more knowledge. Banoo stated that to write better, she tries to read related texts about the topic that she wants to write about and speaks to her classmates to help brainstorm ideas. She explained that reading a lot not only helped her to gain new information but also allowed her to become familiar with appropriate sentence structure, vocabulary, idioms, expressions, and different writing styles. Moreover, she expressed that although she did not like to receive negative feedback, writing a lot and getting feedback from the professors and peers helped her to improve her academic writing.

She reported that improving her writing makes her feel more confident than before, and helps her develop deeper thoughts and understanding. She said that her previous writing experience helped her a lot, and she could successfully transfer her previous writing competencies in her current education. Engaging in conversation with native speakers of English, watching and listening to media are some strategies that she uses to overcome her difficulties. She mentioned that having better language skills, such as grammar and vocabulary and the ability to express herself, would probably help her to write with clarity, but it does not help her to generate ideas. She said that not knowing the right words creates confusion for the reader and knowing the right words in her opinion means that she would successfully convey her thoughts and ideas. Banoo showed that she is aware of some useful elements of good writing, but her opinion was limited to the surface level. Although she mentioned that the ability to express self could help her to improve her writing, her focus was mainly on grammar and vocabulary.

As a whole, Banoo does not have any interest in writing and what she has learned about writing was because of writing assignments and papers, which were the part of her education. Her previous writing experience was limited to writing essays in her home country and her first exposure to academic writing was at the undergraduate level. Despite her unwillingness to engage in the written form, Banoo made efforts to develop her writing competency through the available resources such as professors' and peers' feedback in the graduate program. I noticed that she does not show interest in presenting any national or ethnic identity in her writing and instead she may seek to construct a more Western academic writing identity, which is opposite to Ramon who likes to keep and show his Spanish identity when he is writing in English.

Palma. In this part, I present findings related to Palma. She is from Nigeria, and her first language is Yoruba. She has a bachelor's degree in English and History from her home country. She has taken some paralegal courses in Canada and must complete two courses to satisfy the requirements of her master's degree. The main themes from Palma's views and thoughts are academic writing challenges, ideal academic writing identity, autobiographical preferred writing practices, comparing L2 writing identity in her home country and Canada, and possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context.

Academic writing challenges. This section includes Palma's explanation about her writing challenges in the academic setting. Palma mentioned that her challenges in writing are mostly related to vocabulary. She said that not mastering enough words sometimes caused her to be unable to convey her messages and opinions. She noted that it was hard for her to meet the standard of the academic context, and professors' expectations, while

these challenges caused her to feel disappointed and discouraged. She also said that she

experienced rejection, penalties, and lack of acceptance in her master's program:

> When writing, you try to convey a message, which is expected to be read by
>
> others with an invitation into the author's world but when your essay seems not to
>
> meet the standard expected by your instructor, for instance, even though you are
>
> writing from your own perspective, you then get disappointed and discouraged.
>
> (Palma, post-interview questions)

In a similar way to Ramon and Banoo, one of Palma's main difficulties while

writing in the academic setting was vocabulary. In addition, it seems that Palma did not

have enough preparation for studying at the master's level, as she mentioned not being

able to meet academic requirements and expectations as one of her main challenges. It is

evident that she is also very sensitive, as she experienced serious emotional states.

Ideal academic writing identity. In this part, I explain Palma's views about being

a good writer and her ideal writing identity. In Palma's opinion, a good writer is a writer

who describes every setting in a way that helps the readers feel that they are in the scene

and see everything. She said that a good writer in English is someone who writes in

simple, easy, and understandable English, which requires her to use a dictionary less to

find out the meaning of words. She noted that if the language the writer uses is very

complex, with lots of difficult vocabulary, reading that text is not enjoyable. She said,

"Chinua Achebe[3] is an awesome writer. When you read his books, it is as if you are in the

setting and seeing every action yourself. I get lost in his books" (Palma, questionnaire).

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[3]Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* was considered his magnum opus, and is the most widely read book in modern African literature.

Palma mentioned easy vocabulary as one of the characteristics of a good writer, which is similar to Ramon's and Banoo's opinions. In her opinion, easy vocabulary makes a text understandable. Writing in detail is another important feature for Palma. She also shows her concerns about the reader of her texts. She did not mention other features such as being aware of the sociocultural context of the writing, which plays a crucial role in understanding a text, as her ideal writing identity.

Autobiographical preferred writing practices. This section includes Palma's likes and dislikes about writing. She said that she loves to write because she feels free to express herself without any limitations and fears. She is interested in writing about her personal experience and texts and articles that she reads, and writing about topics with no interest is frustrating, boring, and not interesting for her. She likes to have freedom to choose a topic to write about and not have to write about topics that are the choices of others. Answering the question about what impression she wants to create while she writes in academic context, she mentioned that she wants to show her understanding of the topic, make an effective communication, and show her African background. She said that she likes transfer a message in her texts and she is interested in showing her culture and ethnicity. She mentioned that she likes attention to details and making readers feel her experience. Moreover, she said that she has the ability to write in a way that the reader feels and understands everything: "I invite the reader into my world to experience my message as if it is a first-hand experience" (Palma, interview). She mentioned that she is very good at explanation of details and in her opinion writing with details means good writing.

Palma's opinions about writing are quite similar to Ramon's. Like Ramon, she mentioned that she likes writing and prefers writing about familiar topics, while writing

in great detail and representing her culture is her favourite writing style. However, it seems that she considers the academic standard of writing as a limitation for her writing practices and she frequently noted that she prefers freedom. This may be related to the condition of her home country as a British colonized country and a society that seems to have lost its freedom. It seems that she previously viewed writing as a way to express her ideas with freedom and fewer limitations. It is evident that through writing Palma tries to create her own voice in the texts but she noted that she does not feel the Canadian writing context can give her this freedom. Instead of looking at the sociocultural context of her writing practices as a helpful source, Palma views the terms and regulations of academic writing as limitations and restrictions.

Comparing L2 writing practices in her home Country and Canada. This section includes Palma's comparison between her writing practices in her home country and Canada. She noted that she used to perceive herself as a successful and good writer because she writes in depth and with details but she found many differences between English in her home country and Canada. Palma said:

> There are issues of difference in accent, and even words, for example, trouser/pants. The school system in my country, Nigeria, as I know it 25 years ago was teacher centered, which means students do a lot more listening than participation or critical thinking. This is a huge difference from the student centered teaching method that is commonly practiced here in Canada. (Palma, follow-up questions)

Although Palma said that she has not any experience in academic writing in her first language, like Ramon she prefers writing in L1 than L2 because she does not have

difficulties with vocabulary. She also mentioned that writing simple English is not valid although she previously considered writing in simple English as one of the characteristics of a good writer.

   Possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies, and context. This section discusses how Palma tried to use social possibilities for selfhood as one of the important aspects of writing identities. Palma pointed out that her education in Canada was an upgrading opportunity for her status. She noted that she learned from her mistakes and was aware of some differences between the English language that she used in her home country and English in Canada. She said that to overcome her vocabulary challenges in writing she used the dictionary and changed simple words to more advanced vocabulary in her writing. She noted that her writing competency has changed, and she has learned a lot from writing for Master of Education courses. She has learned from her mistakes and from taking other courses such as paralegal courses.

   As a whole, It is evident that Palma is interested in writing but due to her writing challenges, she has had a negative experience in the Western academic setting. Her overall challenges in writing are in the area of lexical knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge is so important for her that she mentions that a good writer is a person who uses simple vocabulary and the only difference that she observed between writing in her home country and Canada is different vocabularies. She is so concerned about the linguistic part of the writing that she does not seem to think that other features of writing are also important. For example, she does not mention anything about the importance of writing context or features of academic writing such as organizing paragraphs, arguing ideas, or developing a text.

The three research participants have some commonalities in their thoughts, views, and challenges. They had similar difficulties in language areas, mostly in lexical knowledge, unfamiliarity with the existing cultural differences between their previous writing setting and their new academic setting, and inability to think critically. They also had a negative attitude toward feedback, and they considered themselves to be unsuccessful writers. However, there are some differences in their experiences in academic writing. Ramon had a significant positive experience in the academic writing in his first language, while Banoo never writes in her first language and Palma does not have any L1 academic writing experience. It seems that Ramon's different background helped him to be aware of some important features of academic writing such as the sociocultural context of writing while the other two participants did not mention it at all. Moreover, Palma responded to questions about her writing in ways that sometimes seemed protective. For example, she mentioned that she liked her writings to be accepted as she writes and it seems that she perceived feedback as rejection and refusal. Banoo's responses to the questions sometimes seemed cautious, while Ramon's views were mostly based on his experience. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

Discussion

This section includes a related discussion about the participants' writing challenges and successes, the scrutiny of the effects of challenges on writing identity, and useful writing strategies and environments that helped the participants to overcome their writing difficulties while writing in the master's program. The three focal research questions are as follows: (a) What are the main challenges and successes that ELLs experience in graduate programs in Education when developing their writing competency

in university settings? (b) How do their challenges and successes affect their writing identities in the second language? (c) What (relationships, experiences, strategies, learning settings, etc.) can help ELLs to construct a strong writing identity in the new language, and to become successful academic writers?

Table 2

Summary of Findings

Participant	Academic writing challenges	Ideal writing identity	Autobiographical preferred writing practices	Comparing writing practices in L1 & L2	Comparing L2 writing practices in home country & Canada	Possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies & context
Ramon	Vocabulary, Topic, common Latin roots words between English & Spanish, pervious writing experience, feeling frustrated & insecure, not having enough information about the socio cultural context of his academic practices	To be understood, writing with clarity, using simple language Writing with depth, showing his previous experience and his views toward other culture and society	Write about familiar topic, prefer writing in L1 rather than in L2 Expressing deeper thought	L1 writing identity: Knowledgeable, understood, accept different views and cultures, deductive style L2 writing identity: Weak, making confusion, unclear, lack of information, Deeper thinker, inductive style.	—	Reading a lot, Using translator, Using dictionary, Google translator, Watching TV. in English, Developing deeper thinking pattern
Banoo	Topic, Vocabulary, & expanding texts, lack of ideas about some topics,	Being able to write about different topics, having passion about writing, writing in understandable style, writing with easy vocabulary, having flexibility, producing new knowledge, consider audience	Not interested in writing No experience writing in L1, Prefer writing about factual material, Writing informative text, Writing about home, work, and religion, Not interested in ethnic background	—	No experience writing in L1, Writing practices in home country: Poor writer, Writing essay, Hard working Writing practices in Canada: same as home country , useful previous experience	Reading a lot, Engaging in conversation with native speaker, Watching TV. In English, Listening to Radio in English Peer & Professor feedbacks, Develop deeper thoughts Transfer previous writing experience in new situation

Table 2 (cont'd)

Summary of Findings

Participant	Academic writing challenges	Ideal writing identity	Autobiographical preferred writing practices	Comparing writing practices in L1 & L2	Comparing L2 writing practices in home country & Canada	Possibilities for self-hood, experiences, strategies & context
Palma	Vocabulary, Topic Meeting professors & academic context 'expectation pervious writing experience feeling disappointed & discouraged, rejected	Writing in details, writing in simple English	Very interested in writing, Showing her African descent, and culture, Feels free with no limitation, Writing about personal experience and familiar topic	—	Writing practices in home country: good writer, writing in depth and details Writing practices in Canada: different from home country, confused	Reading a lot, Using dictionary to replace simple words with advanced words

The following sections present answers for the research questions and present the related discussions. Each section also includes commonalities and differences between participants' views and experiences.

ELLs' Writing Challenges

All of the participants pointed out that writing in the academic context is challenging for them and, depending on their background, they experienced some sort of difficulties while writing their assignments and papers. The most common challenges of these three participants can be divided under three main categories: linguistic knowledge, cultural differences, and critical thinking. In what follows, I discuss how the three research participants had difficulties in these three areas.

Linguistic knowledge. From the data, it is evident that all three participants encountered difficulties with language, especially with choosing appropriate vocabulary. Lack of enough lexical knowledge caused them to be unable to convey their thoughts and views. They discussed that without mastering a wide vocabulary they are not able to write as they intended, and that has caused them frustration. They frequently mentioned that they prefer easy English, which means not having to check the dictionary to look up words. Vocabulary knowledge was so important for them that all of them consider utilizing simple words in a text as a characteristic of a good writer. In their opinion, an understandable text means a text without any complicated words. They expressed that if a text was not simple then reading it was not enjoyable. However, Ramon has experienced further challenges with vocabulary, as the English language and Spanish have shared Latin common root words with different and sometimes opposite meaning. He felt confused with the words, and sometimes he struggled reading in his first language:

As a Spanish speaker, sometimes I confused the meanings, and use in English a word that

in Spanish has a meaning but in English is completely different. I can tell you an example

like "inhabit" for example; in English inhabit means nobody is in a place It's an inhabited

place, ... excuse me, on the contrary, is somebody is something in a place in Spanish is

completely the opposite, nobody is in the place. (Ramon, interview)

Palma also had extra trouble with vocabulary as she found differences between English in her

home country and English in Canada. Different word pronunciation and word usage for the same

object (e.g., trouser vs. pants) add to her challenges with vocabularies.

These findings show that these graduate students came to higher education without

sufficient preparation. Language proficiency is one of the most important requirements for non-

native speakers at the university level. These findings are similar to results of many other related

studies that reported insufficient lexical knowledge as one of the main challenges of ELLs while

writing in the academic setting (Al-Buainain, 2009; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Hirano, 2014;

Osman & Abu Bakar, 2009; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008).

Cultural differences. Cultural differences, such as thinking patterns mentioned by

Kaplan (1966), caused the participants another kind of challenge when writing in the Western

academic context. For example, Ramon found that writing deductively was not appropriate in an

English academic writing setting, as English is a kind of direct language. He used to write in

details in his first language and that showed writer's sophistication. This difference indicates that

his previous experience was not beneficial for him. Taking an indirect approach in writing

caused him difficulties and frustration in the academic context. He said:

In Spanish you have to explain the context first, historical, cultural, social context and

then you go step by step to the details. In English, you have to go to the details at your

first sentence. It was kind of challenging trying to use my skills [I used] when writing in

Spanish, trying to put that skills in English it's not always work. (Ramon, interview)

These findings are similar to results of research by Li (2007). One of his research participants in

her writing practices at the graduate level wrote gradually, in detail, while she was expected to

write to the point. She did not mention the most important points at the beginning and took an

indirect approach to her writing.

Further, meeting academic context and professors' expectations were extra challenges for

Palma. She experienced not being accepted as she was and got frustrated because of too much

feedback and correction from the professors. She also found that her previous writing experience

was different from her writing in a Canadian university context. She used to perceive herself as a

good writer but receiving feedback from professors led her not to have any positive views about

herself as a writer. Her inability to think through a Western academic lens and her resistance to

new changes may have caused her these difficulties.

Therefore, based on the participants' performance in the academic setting, it would

appear that their second challenge was the cultural differences between their previous experience

and education in a Canadian educational environment. Similar research indicates that ELLs have

difficulties meeting Western academic expectations due to the existence of different cultural

features, and these cultural differences affect their writing style and meaning making while

writing in the academic setting (Angelova & Riazantseva , 1999; Gao, 2012; Krampetz, 2005; Li,

2007).

Critical thinking. Chance (1986) states that "critical thinking is the ability to analyze

facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences,

evaluate arguments and solve problems" (p. 6). Also, in relation to critical thinking and writing

identity, Akindele (2008) says that "the ability of the writer to evaluate and argue is very crucial; and argumentation requires critical thinking, which can be seen as the product of individualism and identity, which graduate students are expected to demonstrate in their writing" (p. 7). Critical thinking in these views is considered as a tool to help language learners to write reasonably and proficiently.

Keeping the aforementioned definitions about critical thinking in mind, from the findings it appears that the inability to think critically prevented participants from producing enough and appropriate content and they felt they were weak in content development, generating ideas, and high-quality papers. They mentioned that they had a difficult time with unfamiliar topics. They said that they liked to be free to choose the topic because some of the topics that they had to write about were challenging for them and they did not have enough ideas and thoughts to write about them. All of them reported that they received much feedback due to writing with unclear and non-understandable content. For example, Banoo mentioned that she sometimes could not write as much as she was supposed to write and that was because of not having any idea about the topic and sometimes she had ideas but because of not knowing the right words, she could not build up the story. Ramon and Palma also reported that they prefer to write about familiar topics and they have difficulties with unknown topics.

In other words, it seems that the participants could not think and question themselves during the writing process to help them write as they are expected. Since the whole process of writing such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, evaluating, developing, and organizing demands thinking, students at the graduate level need to think critically and be inquisitive in the whole process of writing. The participants in this study preferred to write about familiar and

personal topics instead of serious academic topics. Therefore, it seems that their inability to think critically was another common challenge among the participants.

In sum, these findings support Ivanič's (2004) multilayered view of language that proposes text is surrounded by three other layers, namely cognitive process, event, and sociocultural and political context. These results demonstrated how three participants' writing practices, such as writing assignments and papers, were affected by cognitive processes. They frequently expressed their concerns about the native speakers' views, and their inabilities in transferring their L1 writing competency into L2 writing practices. In addition, the way that participants perceived themselves as graduate students and the way they interpreted feedback led them to feel that they are not successful students in a Western academic setting. Similarly, since they felt that they were not able to adapt to the sociocultural demands of their academic setting, they produced texts that were not acceptable as high-quality academic papers.

These findings support the sociocultural theory of language that considered language learners as "differentially-positioned members of social and historical collectivities, using (and thus learning) language as a dynamic tool" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.419). Besides, the results show that writing is "purpose-driven communication in a social context" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 234) and academic literacy is a social practice that varies according to culture, genre, and context (Lea & Street, 2006). In the other words, in order to learn to write competently and be successful writers in the academic context, ELLs need to be aware of the influential factors on the production of a text.

The Effect of Writing Challenges on Writing Identities

As I mentioned in the previous section, writing challenges and difficulties caused the three participants to feel frustration and disappointed that they were unable to represent

themselves as they intended. All participants wanted to be understood while writing in the academic setting . They wanted to transfer their messages through their writing clearly and comprehensibly. They liked to represent themselves as informative writers who have adequate insights and knowledge about the topic of the writing. They were all interested in showing who they are both personally and socially. However, the lack of appropriate linguistic knowledge— mainly lexical knowledge, cultural differences, and lack of critical thinking—caused them to feel that they were unable to represent their ideal writing identities. Based on the theoretical framework of this research that states that writing identity includes four aspects, namely autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for self-hood (Ivanič, 1998), in what follows I explain how these problems and challenges affected these four aspects of participants' writing identities in the university setting.

Linguistic knowledge and the discoursal self. Burgess and Ivanič (2010) point out that the discoursal self is the representation of the writer's views and beliefs "that the writer constructs through her writing practices; her choices of wording; and other semiotic means of communication" (p. 240). Further, Ivanič and Camps (2001) compare speech with writing and state that although writing does not have the same phonetic and prosodic aspects of speech, it includes "the lexical, syntactic, organizational and even the material aspects of writing constructed identity just as much as do the phonetic and prosodic aspects of speech and thus writing always conveys a representation of the self of the writer" (p. 3). In other words, linguistic features that are selected and utilized by the writers have a direct relationship with their representation of their writing identities. However, all three participants in this research repeatedly stated that their lack of vocabulary knowledge caused them to feel unable to write with ease and comfort. They had to check a dictionary a lot, which caused them to lose their

focus on the writing and expressing their thoughts. They had many ideas but were unable to find the correct words to transfer those views into a written text and all of them received much feedback about unclear and awkward sentences. Ramon, for example, said that his biggest struggle in writing in English is related to vocabulary and that language is a huge barrier for him. Banoo also mentioned that one of her main struggles in writing in English is that she is unable to articulate her thoughts and views with the right choice of words and accurate sentence structure. Palma also said that after writing a first draft, she replaced the simple words with more advanced ones because in her opinion writing in simple words does not look professional and appropriate for the academic setting.

Therefore, these findings show that the participants' challenges in the linguistic area, especially vocabulary, affected their representation of discoursal self as one of the aspects of writing identity. The ability to use appropriate words and phrases that related to the field of study and the topic of the writing, and that are acceptable in the academic setting, are all part of the construction of the discoursal self as a writer. Participants' lack of lexical knowledge led them to be unable to express their opinions and views and, they felt, contributed to negative feedback on weak papers. As a result, they were not able to construct and represent a strong discoursal self.

Cultural differences and autobiographical self. According to Ivanič (1998), autobiographical self is one of the aspects of writing identity that concerns the views, interests, values, and background that writers bring to their writing practices. Students who find their previous abilities and backgrounds acceptable in a new academic setting can construct a positive autobiographical self while students who perceive their past practices as disadvantageous are unable to represent a strong autobiographical self.

Findings of this research showed that cultural differences were one of the main

challenges of all three participants. For example, the direct style of writing was a problem for Ramon as he came from a deductive writing style background. He received much feedback from his professors indicating that he wrote too many unnecessary and unimportant details and was not being straightforward. Moreover, he mentioned that he did not have enough information about Canada, and he did not feel secure when he wrote something because he was not sure about the audience's reaction. In other words, his lack of familiarity with the sociocultural aspects of the writing setting prevented him from writing with confidence.

Palma was frequently questioning her master's program and expressed her confusion about the professors' expectation. She explained that she used to know herself as a good writer and writing in detail is her preferred writing style, but she received negative feedback in the Canadian writing setting that expects a direct approach in writing without unnecessary details. However, Banoo mentioned that she could transfer her previous experience into the new setting. She also explained that by writing her own views and understanding about facts, she tried to represent her personal and social identity in her texts but received much feedback from her professors mostly related to unclear and non-understandable text, which caused her to feel frustration.

It seems that due to the cultural differences, what the participants of this research brought to their writing practices from the past was not beneficial and, as a result, they could not establish their autobiographical self in the new academic setting. Adapting to the cultural and educational expectations of the second language contexts is crucial in developing ELLs' writing identities. The cultural differences, which affect thinking patterns and consequently the writing style, affected the participants' writing identities.

Critical thinking, self as author. It seems that the inability to think critically led the

participants to be unable to express their writing identity regarding authorial self in the academic setting. Self as the author refers to the sense of self-worth and the writer's authorship. Ivanič (1998) explains that this aspect of writer identity relates to this point that the self "has something to say" (p. 184). In other words, based on the definition of critical thinking by Chance (1986) and Akindele (2008) that I previously mentioned, writing in an academic context involves arguing, organizing ideas, and defending opinions, which together requires critical thinking. However, all the participants clearly stated that they felt they were unable to express their ideas and thoughts as they intended. They reported that they have difficulty arguing ideas, developing a text, and writing enough content. For example, Ramon states that he had many ideas related to the topic of writing, but he was not able to articulate his thoughts. Banoo mentioned that sometimes she was not able to write enough content and develop a topic, and Palma noted that she preferred writing about familiar topics. It seems that their inability to think critically caused them to be unable to write as much as they were expected and about any topics that were required which led them to feel they are not able to develop their writing nor write with confidence and autonomy.

In addition, it seems that the three participants, due to their weakness in drawing inferences, problem-solving, and analyzing (part of the requirements to think critically), did not appreciate feedback as a valuable tool that could help them to develop their writing competency. Feedback is described as a "critical function in knowledge acquisition" (Mory, 2004, p. 777), and many researchers (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Seror, 2008) highlight the importance of feedback in developing students' ability in language learning. The participants feel so uncomfortable with the feedback that they declined my request for two of their written assignments with their professors' feedback, and I had to exclude this potential data from my research. It seems that their weaknesses in analyzing and perceiving the comments and feedback

in a positive way led them to have a negative attitude toward feedback.

Therefore, In this way, I argue that when the writers cannot show their ability in arguing ideas, drawing inferences, and developing their thoughts, views, and opinions, they are not able to represent one of the important aspects of writing identity—namely self as the author. Burgess and Ivanič (2010) state that self as the author is "how authoritative the writer feels, how strongly she asserts her position(s), the extent to which she stamps her authorship on the text, and the authoritativeness she conveys to her reader(s)" (p. 240). These findings show that due to the lack of critical thinking ability, the three participants were not able to present their authorial self while writing in the academic setting.

Experience, Strategies, Context, and Possibilities for Self-Hood

Findings show that although the participants experienced many difficulties while writing assignments and papers in their master's program, based on available possibilities for the selfhood, they could develop their writing competency in some way and tried to reshape new writing identities based on academic setting demands. Burgess and Ivanič (2010) define socially available possibilities for selfhood as "the resources for, and constraints on, who a person can be; these circulate in the contexts in which the writer and the reader(s) have participated and are sometimes called subject positions" (p. 236). Burgess and Ivanič argue that in any social community, there are possibilities for people to choose or reject consciously or subconsciously, which affects their way of thinking, valuing, acting, and so on.

The three participants in this research pointed out that they had a better view about their writing competency as they moved toward the end of their master's program. They said that their master's program led them to understand and think better. They all mentioned that they could write with more confidence and had a better feeling toward writing. They all developed deeper

thinking skills as the result of reading different articles from different authors with different views. Banoo said: "I think I slowly grow if I look at my first essay and the last essay that they are entirely different, " adding that "I am not ... at the surface of understanding of things, I think, you know, just I have a deeper, I ... you know, begin to tap the deeper knowledge of certain topics" (Banoo, interview). Ramon also mentioned that he made improvements in different areas. He said that he looked up words in a dictionary less in comparison to the beginning of his master's program. He also became a faster reader, and he could develop ideas better than before. He said, "I have changed my writing over the time hopefully for improvement" (Ramon, interview). Palma noted, "The master program itself changed me. Like I have learned so much. I have learned from my mistakes" (Palma, interview).

The participants all mentioned that the master's program was an opportunity for them to practice writing in the academic context for different courses, which led them to improve their writing competency. The participants mentioned that they used some strategies for overcoming their difficulties such as reading a lot, watching TV in English, listening to the radio, engaging in conversation with a native speaker, and using the translator and dictionary. Ramon mentioned that if he would have started to learn English at an early age, he probably would not have encountered so many difficulties in his graduate studies. However, Palma and Banoo reported that they began their education in their home country from an early age in English, but they still experienced the same problems as Ramon.

It seems that practicing their writing through different assignments for different courses helped the participants' improve their writing. Reading influenced participants' writing and helped them to produce better sentence structure and generate new ideas about the various topics. Feeling better and writing with confidence and ease were other effects of reading on writing. The

participants frequently mentioned that they liked to choose their own topic and write about their own interests. This finding aligns with Cadman's (1997) research on international students' thesis writing, which found that establishing a context that helps students to express a personal voice, can lead to valuable pedagogical impact. All the participants tried to create the fourth aspect of their writing identity or "possibilities for self-hood" by utilizing different strategies, learning from feedback, and learning from their experience in their academic context. Still, although all participants reported some improvement in their writing practices, they felt that they were not successful writers during their master's program.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this Major Research Paper, I explored writing challenges and success, the effects of challenges on writing identity, and the strategies and environment that enhance writing competency of three ELLs in graduate level Education program at an Ontario university.

In this chapter, I first present a summary of findings and discussion. Second, I discuss research strengths and limitations followed by implication of findings. Next, I suggest areas for future research. I finish this research with my final reflection on my experience as a non-native speaker, graduate student in a Canadian university and my achievements after completing my master's program and this research.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

First of all, this research suggests that ELLs' academic literacy practices are influenced by various elements such as language competency, sociocultural context of writing, and the ability to think critically. ELLs' language proficiency plays a crucial role in the accuracy and quality of their writing in the academic setting. For example, having appropriate lexical knowledge help ELLs to choose correct words to convey their thoughts and opinions and to write clearly with confidence. The sociocultural context of writing also has a significant effect on the writing style and acceptance of the writing in the particular context. Not initially viewing the cultural demands of the setting of writing as an important feature in writing, ELLs produce texts based on their previous experience that may not be acceptable in Western academic writing. Social and cultural knowledge such as thinking patterns and writing styles can be viewed as essential competencies for ELLs, as a lack of such awareness leads them to receive inevitable negative feedback that causes them to feel failure in representing appropriate written forms. Moreover, critical thinking is a crucial ability that helps ELLs write logically during the whole

process of writing. Lack of ability to think critically leads students to be unable to write about various topics, extend a text, or present a comprehensive argument.

Second, writing identities are constructed and shifted while ELLs engage in writing practices in the academic setting, and their writing challenges have a significant influence on the different aspects of their writing identities. ELLs' language proficiency affects the shaping of their writing identities in terms of discoursal self. The ability to use the right words and phrases related to the field of the study and the topic of the writing which is acceptable in the academic setting is a part of constructing the discoursal self as a writer. Being aware of the sociocultural context of writing affects the autobiographical self. Students who cannot adapt to the new culture and are unable to find a balance between their previous abilities and backgrounds and the new context cannot construct a positive autobiographical self. Moreover, the inability to think critically causes ELLs to be unable to represent a strong authorial self as another aspect of their writing identity. To establish self as the author, ELLs need to show their ability in organizing and developing their ideas in written forms. They need to utilize their critical thinking skills to argue other authors' ideas and defend their own views to show their voice in their writing. Without this ability, ELLs are not able to represent one of the important aspects of writing identity: self as the author.

Third, ELLs can improve their writing competency and make progress in their academic literacy if they are provided with an appropriate and supportive learning environment, practices, and strategies. Reading various sources has a significant effect on ELLs' writing. Different reading resources help students get information about various topics, which helps them to feel more confident while writing. Reading also helps them in generating new ideas, better understanding, and deeper thinking. Reading various sources helps ELLs to increase their

vocabulary knowledge. In addition, having the opportunity to frequently write also has a significant impact on ELLs' writing competency. Practicing writing through different courses is a unique opportunity that helps ELLs become familiar with the different genres of writing. Further, knowing about the existing differences between the previous educational setting and the Canadian academic setting will help them to adapt to the new environment. When ELLs find out that their home experience is not suitable to the new context, they may be hurt and feel frustration and rejection, but they can understand that success in the new setting requires adaptation and modification. Moreover, although ELLs may have an adverse attitude toward feedback, they can learn from their mistakes. Understandable and supportive comments play a significant role in improving ELLs' writing competency, although they may not appreciate it as a valuable tool for their academic growth. Other resources such as online dictionaries, the opportunity to interact with native speakers, and watching and listening to English media also play a significant role in developing ELLs' writing competency.

Strengths and Limitations

In this study, I collected data from three sources: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and post-interview questions. These multiple sources helped me to report the findings accurately. However, I interviewed the participants once, and I did not utilize other methods of collecting data such as field notes. Moreover, because of my participants' unwillingness, I could not collect their writing samples for use as textual data. If the study was longer and the number of participants was larger than in the current study, I could have used other data collection methods. The size of the study group was small, which helped me spend more time with participants to explore their difficulties in more depth and detail; however, this small sample size does not allow transferring and generalizing the results to other non-native graduate students in

other contexts. I explored participants' challenges and the evolution of their identities through their own lenses, and it is a limitation that I did not get the opportunity to collect any data through direct observation. However, this is a study that investigated what people believe about their own writing, rather than what an observer can see. Since I as the researcher am a non-native speaker and in the same field as the participants, it helped me to add to the discussion and share my experience for a better understanding of the questions on the questionnaire, interviews, and post-interview questions. However, being inside the study could be considered as a disadvantage, and my position in the research prevented me from seeing things that an outsider might see.

Implications

Carrying out this study, I decided to investigate students like myself in order to learn about their difficulties and add to the research and knowledge about non-native graduate students who are often learning English and new ways of thinking and writing at the same time. Besides, I intended to add to current writing pedagogies about learning and teaching writing in English as a second language.

First, ELLs need to be aware of the meaning and have a clear definition of academic literacy, and they need to know about the influential elements of their writing practices in the educational setting such as language proficiency, the sociocultural context of writing, and critical thinking as well. They need to be prepared in various language areas before starting their higher education and continue their studies to improve their language proficiency. They need to know there is no ending point for learning the second language and consistently pursue their learning through various practices. They need practices that help them improve their English language competency in general and their academic writing in particular. To do so, some specific workshops and courses in writing provided by universities can be very helpful. There are also

numerous online resources that ELLs can use to improve their different language skills through self-study, such as: lexical quizzes, games, lexical maps, concordances, class dictionary building, grammar tutorials, exercises, simulations, and games, listening and pronunciation virtual lab activities, reading and writing web tasks, treasure hunts, and web quests.

In addition, ELLs need to be aware of the sociocultural context of the writing. Based on Ivanič's (2004) multilayer view of language, writing is not separable from the cognitive process, event, and sociocultural and political context. Therefore, it is important for ELLs to be familiar with the culture, ideas, and norms of the second language society, as they have a significant role in their academic writing success. They need to know that different cultures have distinct features that are different from one another, as well as different ways of thinking that have a great impact on writing style. For example, in English writing, clarity, cohesion, coherence, and logic have a high value (Kaplan, 1998). To achieve such qualities, ELLs need to have a positive attitude toward the feedback that they receive from their instructors and peers and consider them as a necessary part of their academic growth. Instructors also should provide students clear and comprehensible feedback and introduce them to resources for further self-study and practice.

Furthermore, ELLs need to sharpen their critical thinking skills to produce high-quality essays, theses, or research papers. Critical thinking in this case means that they must be able to show their insights and their deep thoughts in their writing and be able to "analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems" (Chance, 1986, p. 6). ELLs need to know that critical thinking is often approached differently in different cultures (Vyncke, 2012) since thinking patterns are influenced by culture (Kaplan, 1986). To do so, ELLs need practice that helps them enhance their critical thinking skills. The instructors should provide students with an explicit and direct

definition of critical thinking in the academic setting, which can be done through writing workshops, seminars, and different courses. Instructors should provide students with tasks that enhance their critical thinking. Besides workshops and writing tasks, question-and-answer sessions between instructors and students can be beneficial. Introducing clear writing guidelines that do not change based on different instructors' respective expectations can help ELLs gain a clearer picture of their writing practices. Students need explicit practice to learn the different aspects of academic writing such as citations, organization, and discussion. They need methods to enhance their critical thinking as a powerful tool to help them develop a text in a reasonable manner.

Moreover, ELLs need to be aware of different aspects of writing identities and the influential factors on reconstructing and reshaping their identities. To do so, they must practice writing. In this case, writing practice does not mean doing only some activities but also considering learning as a social act that affects the construction of students' writing identities. Wegner (1998) states that students need to be "active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). It is important for the students to know "how they want to sound in their various texts, how this might vary from context to context, and how they might create particular impressions using specific linguistic features" (Saha, 2014, p. 77). This knowledge can be achieved through writing workshops in the universities, and direct and clear feedback.

Finally, ELLs at the graduate level should not be left alone to learn by themselves: "Many students are not taught how to write academically even in their first language" (Al-Buini, 2009, p. 10). They need support and help from different available sources at their universities to not be misled. Different strategies, teaching methodologies, and writing tasks help ELLs to

overcome their challenges and become competent writers in the second language. Instructors should know that leaving ELLs alone and not supporting them may lead these students to develop a negative writing identity which in turn may cause them to fail in their studies and be unable to complete their degrees. Therefore, considering some extra courses for ELLs, providing writing services, both face-to-face and online by instructors or by a student services department, can be beneficial. Instructors should give more time to ELLs to complete their assignments and support them with extra help and feedback.

Areas for Future Research

Future research can be undertaken with different research designs such as grounded theory design, ethnographic design, narrative research design, or a mixed-methods design. Data collection can be done through other methods such as field notes, observation, focused group interviews, and multiple interviews to collect data with more detail. Involving more participants and university professors and interviewing them also can be other valuable resources that can add to the richness of the data. Involving non-native students from other disciplines and making a comparison between them can provide more insight to ELLs' writing challenges. Collecting multiple writing samples as textual data can be another resource to explore writing identity more accurately and comprehensively. Future studies may also use computer programs discussed by Creswell (2015) that are designed to analyze different data (e.g., Atlas.it—www.atlasti.com; HyperRESEARCH—www.researchware.com; MAXQDA—www.maxqda.com).

In sum, other qualitative studies can be carried out to explore writing challenges and writing identities of ELLs according to other disciplines and contexts. For example, involving participants from different countries with different educational and cultural backgrounds to investigate the effects of cultural differences more deeply can be beneficial. Similarly, doing

research based on gender and exploring the writing problems and writing identities from male and female perspectives can provide more depth to this study area.

Final Reflections

I would like here as the final words to reflect on my experience as a graduate student in a Canadian university and also reflect on my experience as the researcher of this study.

I was Alice in Wonderland. This is the statement that best describes my first days of academic life at a Canadian university. Studying at the graduate level in Education was my first experience in a Canadian educational environment as a non-native speaker of English. In the beginning, everything was weird, new, and confusing, but little by little, I began to find my way and started to learn both personally and professionally.

In contrast to research that states that ELLs get lost in a new academic setting, I argue that I did not get lost but instead added to my previous knowledge and developed new identities. During my master's program, I read articles, met different peers and instructors, wrote for various courses, and received both positive and negative feedback that were great sources for learning. Through learning in a meaningful way, self-awareness, thinking and reflecting critically, I found my way in the new academic setting, and I think any individuals need these essential skills for their progress and development.

By reflecting critically on our perceptions and knowledge, we get involved in the learning process and make it constant and continuous. Through reflecting, we can make a connection between knowledge and our life-long experiences and achieve meaningful learning that may lead to self-awareness and a better way of thinking. Thinking and reflecting in a critical way can be the key factors that make the learning process effective and meaningful. Without the use of critical thinking and reflection in the learning process, we cannot say learning happens

completely and correctly. Self-awareness can help us understand our assumptions, beliefs, and frames of thoughts, and critical reflection can help us explore ways of changing them. According to Mezirow (1997), "becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions is the key to transforming one's taken-for-granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change" (p. 9). In other words, every time we learn a subject, it is the starting point for another learning opportunity, and this is how we reach the goal of education according to Dewey, who says "the goal of education is more education" (as cited in Kohn, 2003, p. 5).

Finding notions and concepts of Eastern authors and poets in the articles of Western writers was the most exciting part of my academic journey because it helped me to recognize the benefits of some of my previous learning that helped reshape my autobiographical self and self as author in the Canadian setting. I read several articles from various authors whose views and thoughts reminded me of many ancient texts and poems that I read in my textbooks during my education in Iran. When I read "Deep speaks to deep" from Palmer (2008, p. 16), it reminds me of Hafez (Iranian Poet and Philosopher, 1325-1390), who said "what comes from the heart, goes to the heart" [my translation].

ان سخن کزدل براید لاجرم بردل نشیند

Moreover, Gillfilan (2011) argues that students need compassion and explains how a good relationship between teachers and students can affect the learning and teaching environment. Similarly, Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2008) point out how empathy between teacher and learner can promote learning. I could summarize the whole discussion in one sentence from Naziri Neishaboori (Iranian Poet,1621), who states that "if teacher whispers compassion and kindness to the learners, even on Friday (the weekends in Iran) unwilling students come to school" [my translation].

جمعه به مکتب اورد طفل گریز پای   درس معلم ار بود زمزمه محبتی

Another example is from Stemberg (2008), who points out that students need to learn to think critically, and teachers must promote wisdom in the classroom as well as learn to value ethical issues: "In my view, much of what is wrong in the world today stems from people who are simultaneously smart and foolish" (p. 26). What I perceived from the whole article can be found in this famous Persian proverb: "it is easy to become a Mullah (a person who knows about everything) but tough to become a human" [my translation].

ملاشدن چه اسان ادم شدن چه مشکل

From doing this research, I achieved great knowledge about academic writing. Studying different theories, perspectives, and articles helped me to develop an excellent knowledge about language learning in general and writing competency in particular. Interviewing different students from different countries helped me to gain a deeper understanding of ELLs' difficulties at the graduate level and to notice my similarities and differences with them. Moreover, I discovered how supportive, encouraging, and caring supervision and feedback helped me to complete this research, which I think could be viewed as a successful way of doing research for other instructors who deal with non-native speaker researchers.

All in all, each leaning is followed by another learning, and there is no end, as Avicenna (the great Iranian physician and philosopher, 980-1037) says: "My wisdom now reaches the point that I know that I do not know, and I am an ignorant" [my translation]. I learned and learn, and learning never stops; rather it grows, flourishes, blossoms and is always in progress and as the result, new identities and integrity are born.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

English Language Learners, Writing Challenges, and Writing Identities

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study about writing identities of English

Language Learners in graduate setting. Your participation is greatly appreciated and please do

not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions (email: farzin233@yahoo.com, Phone:

416 833 9544)

Please use all the space you need to answer your questions and try to be as thorough as possible.

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1. Could you please introduce yourself briefly (your name, age, first language, and

    education background)?

2. Do you know someone who is an effective writer? What makes that person a good

    writer? Can you describe that person? What makes his/her writing good?

    a) In your first language?

    b) In English?

3. Do you like to write? What is the best thing about writing? Why?

    a) In your first language?

    b) In English?

4. What kind of writer are you? How do you judge your success as a writer?

    a) In your first language?

    b) In English?

5. Do you usually find writing difficult? What are your struggles when you start writing?

    What do you find as the most problematic part while doing assignments?

a) In your first language?

b) In English?

6. What do you do to write better? Can you describe something that helps you to write better?

7. If you could change something about your academic writing experience, what would it be? Please be as detailed as possible.

8. How does your identity as a writer influence the way you compose and learn to produce academic texts? Did you find any changes in your way of thinking after learning English?

9. Do you think writing difficulties prevent you from having and representing a competent/positive/successful writing identity? (How do you think of yourself as a writer?)

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What efforts do you make to show your academic voice in your paper? Can you comment on the content, linguistic, and textual features you used to fulfill your target? Do you know what I mean by academic voice?

2. What impression do you want to create of yourself while writing academic paper?

3. Do you have a particular identity that you desire to present while writing English academic papers in Canada?

4. What are your strengths as an academic writer in English? What makes you believe so?

5. Do you think your writing competency is constantly changing over time? If so, what are the factors that are making the differences?

6. Do you find your previous writing skills in l1 and l2 are beneficial for you or add to your challenges?