



A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Writer Identity in ELT Research Articles

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on a corpus analysis of the research articles published by Iranians, Chinese, and Turkish authors in the Reading Matrix journal. For this purpose, 62 research articles (373000 words) were meticulously analyzed to determine how the authors project their identities through different types of self-mention practices. Results of the analysis revealed that Chinese authors projected stronger identities in comparison to their Iranian and Turkish counterparts. However, authors from these three nationalities are still far from claiming the identity comparable in quality to that of experienced writers of the field. Findings of this study would be helpful to instructors of L2 writing and research methodology in order to make their students aware of possible self-mention practices and to help them adopt right and timely identities in their publications.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing a good writer identity in academic writing is part and parcel of graduate studies. Yet, many L2 writers are grappling with this issue in their publications. Hyland's (2001) concerned over students' characteristic inhibition about staying behind their claims in their academic writing. According to Hyland (2002), "the words students choose must present their ideas in ways that make most sense to their readers and part of this involves adopting an appropriate identity" (p. 352). The issue of writer identity has recently been the source of heated debate among distinguished figures in this area of study. For instance, Stapleton and Helms-Park (2008), having been criticized by Matsuda and Tardy (2007) for their anti-identity stance in academic writing began to welcome the notion of voice in academic writing, acquiescing that it is a key element that distinguishes between novice and experienced writers in the field. Stapleton and Helms-Park (2008) had initially argued that the majority of novice L2 writers need not further burdened by the prescriptive notions of the voice due to their obsession with correct use of grammar, vocabulary, and textual organization in their academic writing.

Ivanic (1998) has enumerated three aspects of writer identity in the act of writing: autobiographical self, discursal self, and authorial self. The autobiographical self includes writers' life stories, opinions, beliefs, and stance. The discursal self is the extent to which a writer adopts the conventions of a discourse community to claim membership. The authorial self, which is the focus of this study, is the degree to which a writer intrudes into a text and claims herself as the source of its content. This last aspect of the identity, according to Park (2013), is of crucial importance in discussion of academic writing since writers differ considerably in how far they claim authority as the source of the content of the text, and in how far they establish authorial presence in their writing.

Hyland (2002) has repeatedly lamented the reality that students often approach university writing assignments with the idea that academic prose is dry and impersonal. In such a context students are often uncertain about who they are expected to be, and often feel more constructed by texts than constructing them (Hyland, 2009). It seems that, despite a considerable amount of research on writer identity in L2 academic writing (e.g. Hyland, 2002; Hyland, 2009; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; McKinley, 2015; McKinley, 2017), still many students, mostly prohibited by their instructors and some outdated guidelines, mistakenly assume that “they must leave their personalities at the door and subordinate their views, actions, and their personality to its rigid conventions of anonymity” (Hyland, 2001).

Ivanic (1998) maintained that authors generally position themselves in their texts to claim a credible academic identity and to underscore their ideas. A writer identity, according to Hyland (2002), is mainly revealed through the use or absence of the first person pronouns. Personal reference allows readers to interpret the statements from the writers’ perspectives (Hyland, 2001). For this reason, self-mention has been positively received in the literature. However, establishing such an identity is particularly difficult for second language students (Cadman, 1997). He maintained that the difficulty lies partly in the fact that these identities can differ considerably from those they are familiar with from their everyday lives. The literature abounds with the recommendations that students reflect their own voice in their academic writing (e.g. Hyland, 2001; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1998; Matsuda, 2001, Rezvani & Mansouri, 2013).

Examining 240 journal articles from eight disciplines, Hyland (2001) found that writers in the hard sciences such as physics, biology, electronic engineering, and mechanical engineering prefer to downplay their personal role to highlight the issue under investigation, while their counterparts in humanities and social sciences papers projected a stronger identity. He hypothesized that since arguments in such soft knowledge domains are less objective than in hard sciences, authors are inclined to employ more writer pronouns to manifest themselves as the source of the findings.

Rezvani and Mansouri (2013) analyzed Iranian scholars’ authorial presence markers in three Iranian journals of applied linguistics. Findings from their analysis of 30 research articles depicted that first person plural *we* accounted for 77% of authorial markers. Other self-mention terms such as *I, me, my, the researcher* did not appear noticeably in the articles. Though a good corpus study, it did not survey authors’ opinions about identity construction in their own research articles.

In a similar vein, Uysal (2014) investigated whether cross-cultural differences influenced the frequency of indirectness and hedging devices used by Turkish, Indians, and Japanese (NNS) and Anglo-American (NS) writers in a corpus of 120 conference proposals. She found that Turkish and Japanese scholars used indirectness and hedging devices much more than their Indian and NS counterparts. Attributing the results to cross-cultural differences, she argued that being perceived as too direct or indirect in academic writing would reduce the chance of their works to be accepted and disseminated in international conferences.

Since Ivanic’s (1998) seminal work, there has been a substantial number of research articles highlighting the role of identity construction in successful academic writing. However, the majority of EFL students have been struggling ever since, assuming that impersonal reporting of their research findings is an attractive style of argumentation in the eyes of the discourse community members. This misguided belief is not uncommon among Iranian EFL authors. The ways in which writers of other disciplines present themselves and establish their identity in their research articles have been studied in depth (see Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001).

However, self-mention practices in the research articles of applied linguistics requires further investigation. To the best of my knowledge, cross-cultural comparisons of writer identity has been an under-researched area in our context, Iran. Furthermore, there is so little research on Iranian EFL authors' opinions about projecting their identities in research articles. With this in mind, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Do Iranian, Chinese, and Turkish EFL authors use similar kinds of authorial markers in their research articles?
2. What are Iranian EFL authors' opinions about establishing a writer identity in their research articles?

METHODOLOGY

Instruments

The present study made use of two sets of instruments, namely a corpus of research articles and semi-structured interviews. Out of 62 research articles analyzed, 24 belonged to Iranians, 25 published by Turkish, and only 13 written by Chinese. The *Reading Matrix* journal was chosen for the purpose of this study mainly because it is one of the relatively well-known international journals in which Iranian EFL students and professors regularly publish their manuscripts.

Procedure

This study employed an eclectic method (Riazi & Candlin, 2014). Initially, the corpus of 62 research articles (373000 words) published between 2010- 2018 by Iranian, Chinese, and Turkish EFL writers in *the Reading Matrix* journal was scanned for expressions of self-mention using *Wordpilot 2000*, a text analysis software. The self-mention practices that I looked for included first person singulars (I, me, and my), first person plurals (we, us, and our), cases of self-citation, and another common example of self-mention term such as the researcher(s). All cases were meticulously examined in their contexts to ensure that they exclusively referred to the author(s) of the research article. All forms of the above-mentioned pronouns that referred to participants other than authors were discarded. Then, in the second phase, using convenience sampling, I interviewed some of the Iranian authors in order to throw some light on the frequencies of self-mention practices they employed in their research articles.

RESULTS

First and foremost, the relatively diverse frequencies of self-mention forms below clearly show that academic writing is not the faceless genre as it used to be. As can be seen in the table, Chinese authors, by and large, demonstrated stronger identities compared with their Iranian and Turkish counterparts despite their considerably lower contributions to the journal during the seven-year period.

Table 1. Self-mention practices across nationalities in the *Reading Matrix* journal (2010-2018)

Country	Total	Self-Citation	I	Me	My	We	Us	Our	The researcher(s)
China	166	8.4	17.4	1.8	3.6	33.7	1.8	25.3	7.8

Turkey	153	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	49.7	5.2	18.9	22.8
Iran	96	9.3	1.04	0.0	2.08	48.9	0.0	8.3	30.2

Although, not unlike their counterparts, Chinese authors did not use *my* and *me* in their research articles, they outnumbered Iranian and Turkish authors in using first person singular *I* with 17.4%. Turkish writers did not even use this common self-mention form, yet they utilized first person plurals *we* and *our* 34% and 25% respectively, though mostly to explain the procedure of their studies. Likewise, Iranians attempted first person singulars only twice throughout their research articles. This is partly in line with Rezvani and Mansouri's (2015) study in which the occurrences of first person singulars paled in comparison with those of first person plurals. An experienced university instructor, when notified about the zero frequency of person pronouns in his article and asked about Iranian writers' reluctance to mention themselves in their works, reacted angrily "*Look, I am a humble person. I will not use I or my even when I get retired. We have been told to use passive voice*". This contention is in contrast to Hyland's (2001) opinion that some authors mistakenly assume that academic persuasion is only achieved through humility towards the discourse community. In a similar vein, another university professor commented, "*It is not the norm to use the first person in the research even if you have a novel idea. It makes no difference. Only distinguished figures in the field can use I*". Interestingly enough, a PhD student revealed that one needs to read the related literature deeply in order to both write in a native-like fashion and to claim a strong identity in their works: "*I like to use first person pronoun to stay behind my claims. However, I really feel bad about doing so by reading only a handful of sources. That's why I prefer to use rather neutral terms such as the researcher to express my opinion or even to report the findings of my study*". This comment is closely associated with Felix and Lawson (1994), who emphasized that having both a good command of English and deep knowledge in the area under investigation are equally necessary for successful academic writing.

Back to the table, Iranian writers made a substantial use of first person plural *we* (48.9%). However, it should be noted that the lion's share of this use was limited to explaining the procedure. In other words, they hardly utilized the pronoun *we* to make a claim based on their findings. Additionally, in single-authored articles, the author made excessive use of *we* and *our* instead of *I* and *my*. This preference on the part of the Iranian writers could be interpreted in term of cultural differences, as Hyland (2003) maintained that cultural factors insert a considerable impact on how people write in a second language. In Persian, there is a natural inclination to use first person plural instead of first person singular. Alternatively, preferring the pronoun *we* over *I* in single-authored articles, according to Hyland (2001), is a self-effacing device employed by writers to reduce personal attributions.

To my surprise, two of the Iranian experienced professors did not use any forms of first person plurals (*we*, *our*, and *us*) in their co-authored articles with their students. It possibly means that the professors did not bother to read the manuscripts even once before the publication to provide students with the necessary conventions of academic discourse and to encourage them to project their identities throughout the research article. This beneficial impact of an experienced co-author was evident in one of the articles that a Turkish academic had published with Suresh Canagarajah in 2014. Yayli and Canagarajah's (2014) study comprised about 20% of all the occurrences of *we* pronoun used by Turkish authors.

Finally, with regard to self-citation, the majority of the authors from the three nationalities appeared to be novice researchers since the number of times they referred to their previous

works was not substantial, with Iranians 9.3%, Chinese 8.4 %, and Turkish 3.2 %. When asked about the paucity of self-citation among Iranian authors, one participant eloquently answered, “*The main reason is that we generally tend to jump from one area of study to another instead of delving into different aspects of a specific topic. That's why we usually end up publishing rather unrelated research articles. For example, it is no surprise that we can't refer to our article about motivation while writing a new article on assessing writing.*”

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, It can be safely assumed that the Iranian EFL (novice) authors are still heavily influenced by the misguided instructions of some outdated manuals and their instructors' admonition, hence disguising their identities in their research articles. Perhaps one of the reasons that Iranians EFL writers are not active in the realm of autoethnography studies is that they are basically not comfortable with projecting their identities in their works. A preponderance of passive structures and rather neutral terms such as “the author(s) of the present study”, and “to the best of the researchers' knowledge” in Iranian EFL authors sends an unfortunate message that there is hardly any voice in their academic writing.

A large proportion of the articles analyzed here were action research conducted by teachers in their own classroom, yet they noticeably alienated themselves even in reporting the results of their own studies. This is in sharp contrast to the principles of postmethod pedagogy, which struggles to empower teachers to do action research regularly and publish their findings with confidence (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Our argument is not that students are allowed to produce a generous number of person pronouns in their articles. Rather I argue for a prudent and timely use of self-mention terms which helps the articles appeal to a wide readership. Therefore, the instructors, instead of frowning upon students' use of person pronouns, should help these novice researchers how to read deeply and think critically so that they could stand firmly behind their claims in their own publications later.

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