Writer Identity and ESL Learners

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Critical Discourse Analysis provides a way to study power relations and the embedded ideologies that shape how second-language students come to understand who they are as writers.

Mandy (pseudonym) was one of those students who could bring a smile to the face of any teacher with her enthusiastic entrance into the classroom. Friendly, perky, thoughtful, and outspoken, this Korean American teacher candidate was a charismatic addition to my required junior-year writing course at a large public U.S. university. Early in the semester, Mandy emerged as an articulate leader—asking questions, clarifying her own and other students’ points at any opportunity, and fervently sharing her views on the teaching of writing. Born in Korea, she emigrated young and had been attending U.S. schools since kindergarten. Because Korean was the only language spoken in her home, she participated in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs throughout elementary school. Traces of second-language (SL) influence were not easily detected in her speech, although close examination of written work showed some evidence of first-language interference.

As with many students struggling to become more skillful users of academic discourses, Mandy had become convinced she was “not a good writer.” My research interest in student-constructed writer identity emerged from watching young writers struggle to find their voice and gain more positive acknowledgment of their efforts in the academy, often while facing a judgment of incompetence by those with little knowledge about or experience with SL learners.

Too often ESL speakers and writers accept the judgments of teachers as truth, unaware of the social and political realities that reinforce the labeling. ESL students whose written language does not fit the standard are typically linked to a group called “basic writers” and labeled as deficient, incompetent, or even lacking in cognitive ability (Harris, 1997). In the 1990s, however, the idea of language conflict was embraced by composition theorists. This newer conception furthered understanding of the frustration experienced by students like Mandy. Lu (1991) believed that students often feel marginalized or like outsiders to academic discourse because of the response to their language in school settings and because they often write at a site of conflict. Both Harris (1997) and Lu contended that these students are always located at
points of conflict among competing discourses. The conflict concept, as opposed to the deficit construction, sees writer identity as social and political, related to issues of race, class, and gender. Unable to disrupt academic practices that privilege native writers, ESL students often reflect the conflict, struggle, and tensions of writing differences that dominate the institutional bounds of school in the United States. Bloome (1991) argued that from an ethnographic perspective, reading and writing can be seen as social and cultural processes—rather than cognitive or literary as perceived by so many.

The language of ESL writers is too frequently labeled inferior in the same way that speakers of dialects or nondominant forms of English face negative labeling (Labov, 1982). Because people are bound by their histories and access to different discourses, understanding identity in general and writer identity in particular can be complex. For students struggling with aspects of negative writer identity (e.g., “fearful of writing,” “can’t write”), hearing more clearly the voices of their history and negotiating the ideological boundaries that have both enclosed and excluded them can be critical.

What follows is the case study of Mandy and the writer identity she constructed for herself. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to unpack Mandy’s ideologies and examine themes and issues familiar to ESL students and their teachers. Suggestions are given for working with ESL students in writing situations following the case study.

**Research Design**

The research design of this study brings together ethnographic analysis of classroom events, thematic analysis of Mandy’s descriptions of her writer identity and influences, and CDA of selected written work and spoken events. An ethnographic and discourse-analytic approach to the study of writer identity cannot be reduced to a simple causal equation. Understanding writer identity—especially negative writer identity—in a population that is linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse is a layered process. I do not assume that Mandy used part of one coherent, ideological discourse that is part of an official writing policy that all school personnel would accept, embrace, or act on. There is not only the possibility but also the probability that competing discourses on the practice of writing were at work in her discussions.

**Method**

CDA helps make visible how language positions people in society and how language choices are shaped by a variety of conventions. CDA can be used to raise awareness of language in its social context and can also help people understand and control their own roles in the use of discourse. How does CDA do this? By examining closely writers’ and speakers’ choices or uses of discourses, it is possible to focus on how people position themselves and are positioned by and construct and are constructed by the linguistic and ideological choices they make. CDA as a research methodology allows for an increased understanding of how language shapes and positions people as they negotiate the socially available discourses at their disposal. Gee (1999) contended that (a) there are as many different literacies as there are discourses and (b) we acquire a primary discourse as part of our initial socialization within our specific family culture. Gee believed that the discourses we acquire later in life, such as academic discourse, are secondary discourses. Within most discourses there exists a variety of subject positions. “Good writer” and “bad writer” are subject positions common to writing classes.

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With the exception of the transcribed conference excerpt, the texts analyzed were portfolio requirements of a junior-year content area writing course at a major university in the Northeast. The first text was assigned at the semester’s beginning, the journal entries were written throughout, and the conference took place during the semester’s last few weeks. Using Fairclough’s (1995, 2003) method of CDA, which entails close examination and coding of texts as a means of discovering the ideologies embedded in the language, I looked for the discourses Mandy drew on, resisted, or omitted. Thus the link between Mandy’s own identity construction and the social, cultural, and political world that shaped her perceptions became more evident. Definitions of terms used in this study follow to help readers better understand the analysis.
sonal experiences is what produces real cultural diversity in the classroom.

The selected excerpts from Mandy’s portfolio help tell her story. Although her story cannot speak for all ESL students, her experiences might help instructors consider writer-identity issues in a new way, replacing the more typical assumptions of deficit with one of the students in conflict.

Microanalysis #1: Response to Writer Identity Prompt

The first text, “Who Am I as a Writer,” gives evidence of a blending of traditional formal and expressivist discourses. It also demonstrates how Mandy resisted and conformed to writing practice in the academy. She, like most students, did not create a single and fixed writer identity but instead created a multiple and conflicting identity in this text. In general, the simple sentence is the unit used for analysis. Mandy’s assignment was to write a full typed page in response to the prompt “Who are you as a writer?”

(1) Hmmmm
(2) This question has had me in deep thought for the past twenty minutes or so
(3) and still I don’t know how to answer the question.
(4) I don’t usually consider myself to be the best writer.
(5) I usually get jammed up when I have to write a paper because I have a hard time getting started.
(6) I think the introduction should be the most powerful part of an essay.
(7) After all, if the introduction doesn’t grasp the reader’s attention, why would they want to continue reading the essay?
(8) But once I get started, I can babble on forever.
(9) However, this often gets me into trouble with run on sentences and other grammatical errors
(10) Especially with organization.
(11) That’s what I don’t understand about writing.
(12) I know that there has to be standards and guidelines
(13) but I don’t understand how someone is allowed to have the authority to judge and grade someone’s writing ability.
(14) After all, isn’t writing supposed to be a form of individual expression.

(15) I mean, I understand that one must be grammatically correct and organized in their ideas so that the reader may be able to understand and follow the writer’s train of thought.

(16) But what if I said that this is how I think.

(17) I write as I think and what I think.

(18) I guess that is the best way to describe my abilities as a writer.

(19) I write how I think and what I am feeling.

(20) This way, I don’t waste my time pretending to be what I am not.

(21) I’m not sure if I answered your question.

(22) I guess the best way to describe my abilities as a writer.

(23) I write how I think and what I am feeling.

(24) This way I don’t waste my time pretending to be what I am not.

(25) And I don’t waste the reader’s time by presenting ideas that are not genuinely mine.

Microanalysis of lines 4–8 shows Mandy wavered between deficit and competent identities in relation to traditional formal discourse. She’s not the “best writer” (line 4) and has trouble with introductions, which she feels must be strong to keep the reader interested. This language echoes that of writing teachers prodding students to write powerful introductions.

Mandy did not question her ability to write out ideas as she took on the competent identity when saying she can “babble on forever” (line 8). She moved to deficit, however, when she thought about the structure of that writing (lines 9–10) with its grammatical requirements and need for the prescribed organization.

Even in this initial assignment, Mandy struggled with the authority of others (lines 13–17) to question her form of expression. While accepting that writing must meet guidelines (lines 12, 15) she began to resist that concept with two statements: “But what if I said this is how I think. I write as I think and what I think” (lines 16–17). I saw this as insistence on an individualist identity linked to expressivism, as it conveys the idea that written language can reflect a choice.

A competent writer identity was linked to expressivist discourse for Mandy. She wanted to challenge traditional formal discourse but lacked the political discourse to help her do so effectively, as do most students. She linked a kind of honesty and integrity to her work, fitting Lu’s (1991) concept of a writer in conflict with the academy and its traditional formal ways. Mandy was not saying that she is unable to write as the academy wishes but that to do so would change her writing in ways that would make it less her own.

**Microanalysis #2: Journal Responses to Assigned Readings**

In this next piece, Mandy found voices whose SL issues and identities connected to her own, and she discovered authors whose passion for writing matched her own.

(1) Brenda Ueland, “Everybody is Talented...”

(2) This article really touched me.

(3) I undoubtedly believe that everyone is original and creative in their own way.

(4) However Criticism kills this creativity and self-expression.

(5) Ueland addresses all the issues I have about writing and teachers.

(6) Many teachers have killed my passion for writing with the use of their power to criticize my writing.

(7) Although I internally believe that it doesn’t matter what they think they are the ones grading me; my academic career depends on their opinion.

(8) I don’t think this is fair.

(9) Anaïs Nin “The New Woman”

(10) Like Neruda’s piece, Nin’s article also speaks of her passion for writing.

(11) I think that it is so inspiring to read these words.

(12) “When I don’t write, I feel my world shrinking.”

(13) She gives us such a vivid image of this passion.

(14) I wish that I could feel this way about writing.

(15) In a way I think I do but writing for school kills it.

(16) I enjoy writing when I know I won’t be graded on it.

(17) Amy Tan, “Mother Tongue”

(18) I can thoroughly relate to this article.

(19) Both of my parents speak “broken” English and I speak “broken” Korean.
standardized is frequently at the heart of the academic assignment, and it is this philosophy Mandy so clearly resented. The silencing or death of Mandy’s most loved aspect of writing is a reminder of the compromises so often required by SL speakers using academic discourses.

When Mandy wrote about Tan’s “Mother Tongue,” she asserted her SL identity. Like many of my SL students before her, Mandy wrote that she “can thoroughly relate to this article” (line 19). She positioned herself as the daughter of immigrant parents whose English is not perfect, while she confirmed a pride in her Korean identity and a frustration with those who do not understand that pride.

In line 20, Mandy identified as someone who speaks broken Korean just as she considered her parents speaking broken English. Although I have heard the term broken English many times, juxtaposing it with broken Korean gave it new meaning (i.e., most people think of broken things as needing to be fixed). Mandy’s frustration with academic discourse is its focus on what is “broken” in her writing, not on what is interesting, creative, or intelligent. The “difficulty communicating” in Korean with her parents mirrors the difficulty communicating with professors that she has in the academic classroom. As she straddled both worlds and both languages, this intelligent young woman had come to feel inadequate in both.

The jokes others make regarding people who have Asian accents offended Mandy (line 24), as she is concerned that people who do not speak “perfect English” may be judged “stupid” (line 25). Even though she can write quite well, when using academic discourse she is judged more harshly and may therefore be considered less intelligent. Just as Mandy believed her mother felt embarrassed to speak to some people due to her “broken English” (line 26), so Mandy felt embarrassed to have her academic writing judged for the same reason.

These journal selections draw on Mandy’s multiple subjectivities and demonstrate how identity can shift moment to moment as one negotiates the complexities of writing and language in U.S. society.
Microanalysis #3: Mandy's Conference

In the following conference excerpt, Mandy began to link the hybridity of her own identity to her writing, exploring ESL issues in terms of stereotypes about nonnative speakers and her frustration with those who judge nonstandard-English usage with a lack of intelligence.

(1) When I think of writing—I really see writing as like someone's individual expression
(2) and I think if someone writes in a certain way that another person doesn't agree with it really doesn't mean it is wrong.
(3) You know, I think that is just their style
(4) but a lot of people are like, “No, that is wrong, you shouldn't have done it like that, like you have to go by this structure”
(5) And I personally just don't understand like how they can put limits and structures and like borders and wall around writing
(6) You know because writing is just writing, and that is what I don't understand.
(7) Like my teachers are like, “No, this is wrong, you shouldn't have done it like that”
(8) And I have teachers like rephrase my words and that really upsets me
(9) And I am like, you know, if I want it like that, I would have written it like that
(10) but this is how I saw it, you know, so that is why I wrote like this
(11) And they will reword me and then, to me, that ruins my paper, you know
(12) like it is not mine anymore

(13) I really liked that article because I totally related to it
(14) You know, like I read it and I was like, wow, that makes a lot of sense
(15) And it is weird, because even like a few weeks ago, my roommate was saying something about one of his TAs who really couldn't speak English and has an accent
(16) and how like it is kind of hard to understand her
(17) And I got upset
(18) And that is when it hit home and I looked at him
(19) That person is probably more intellectual than you are
(20) But it is just the language
(21) That's all it is
(22) There is a language difference
(23) You know it is nothing more than that
(24) My parents are very intelligent people, you know
(25) but they can't speak English
(26) And sometimes it is weird because I will be talking with my friends
(27) Most of my friends are white
(28) So they don't like go through most of the same things I did
(29) Korean parents in our generation are exactly the same, especially the ones that immigrated here
(30) But they haven't been changing with the Korean culture and like Korea is so different now
(31) Like I go back like every three years and it changes every time I go back
(32) But our parents aren't there to experience it so they are holding on to their old traditional culture like it is exactly the same and it is not
(33) Some of my friends will be like, “What are your parents talking about—you are American you have been raised here like all your life”
(34) But I am not American
(35) I am Korean American
(36) I am never going to say that I am not Korean just because I have been raised here my entire life
(37) Just because I can speak the English language and everything
(38) And it's funny to have some people think that I don't want to be Korean
(39) Like it doesn't make sense to me

Mandy made many contributions to our class. She was passionate about the complexity of being bilingual and bicultural in the United States. Her conference showed sparks of the conflict ideology in her resistance to the dominant discourse of school (lines 8–12). While using expressivist ideology, she moved, or at least took some steps toward, an identity that conflicts with the notion that what teachers say represents the only correct way to say things—an identity that was more political than she had adopted previously. Mandy revealed that teachers rephrasing...
her words upset her because she wants things to stay the way she wrote them. Rephrasing ruins her work, making it not hers (lines 9–12).

Mandy’s identification with Tan’s article (lines 13–14) emphasizes her lived understanding of SL issues and the problems they pose. As she recalled an incident when her roommate criticized a teaching assistant’s lack of fluency with the English language, Mandy adopted both an SL and a multicultural discourse (lines 17–21) to coincide with her own SL identity. Her frustration that SL speakers might be judged as less intelligent may well mirror her frustration with and relationship to academic discourse in the university where a perceived lack of fluency can mark students as less intelligent.

She explained what being Korean American means for her and shared aspects of her bicultural identity (lines 26–39) and frustration about others’ perceptions of her. She made connections with the subtle kinds of prejudice that exist among her friends (lines 15–25).

The expressivist discourse Mandy learned from a favorite high school teacher made sense in her life. She understood that some people in school value personal expression in its myriad varieties. She was able to use that discourse to survive in the world of the university. Access to expressivist discourse had left her conflicted about language issues and writing, and, because it clashes so much with traditional academic ideology typical at the university level, it also left her frustrated.

Mandy was rebelling against those powers that judge “difference” as “less,” or “incorrect,” or even “unintelligent.” It’s just “a language difference” (line 22), she wrote. “You know it is nothing more than that” (line 23).

Although some excerpts from Mandy’s conference tape wander from issues of writer identity, they reflect how language and culture are intricately tied to other aspects of our identity. Who we are, how we see the world, and how the world sees us cannot be separated like ingredients in a recipe. Rather, we are like the product of the recipe, mixed together in ways that make single aspects inextricable from others. As Mandy wrote, “And it’s funny to have some people think that I don’t want to be Korean...it doesn’t make sense to me” (lines 38–39). Expressivism values individuals where they are, so a foot in an American world and another in a Korean world is not problematic, and Mandy seemed to value that hybridity in life and writing.

On observation, Mandy’s enthusiasm for writing belied the lack of confidence she felt for academic assignments. It was through the microanalyses that I discovered her conflicts and concerns. In class, I saw the enthusiastic, hard-working student, thoughtful in her work and careful but spirited in her presentation. She was liked and respected by her peers, often taking a leadership role in response groups—organizing, supporting, and encouraging, despite any initial nervousness. Periodically, she consulted me about grammatical issues, asking questions that were the typical, technical questions often asked in my college courses.

**Summary**

The “nontraditional” student may well be in the majority in the public university today, but many still feel like outsiders. Mandy returned to her home where English was not spoken; she understood her parents’ breadth of knowledge and intelligence, which she found could be judged as inadequate in mainstream America. Her lived experiences often conflicted with the bootstrap stories of American experience. Mandy had discovered that a bias existed that she had not fully recognized before. She now realized that the prejudice toward her parents extended to her in ways she was just beginning to understand.

Identity is not static. Mandy existed between the world of a living, breathing, changing public university and a home life that tried to uphold traditional Korean values but that was also in flux. Mandy’s existence changed her parents’ lives no matter how tightly they held on to their traditions. “Who am I as a writer?” she wrote. “Hmmm.” No wonder it took her 20 minutes to begin her answer.

Clearly Mandy did not resist all traditional formal discourse. She was learning to negotiate and integrate her worlds and philosophies, an often messy process. Letting go of some beliefs can mean letting go of parts of who we are. Integrating can be a messy process, more recursive than linear.

Poststructuralists view language as the site of both social and political struggle (Shor, 1992), but many
students lack the awareness that it is possible to contest the voices of authority, instead of accepting as truth traditional responses to their writing, and thus, to their perceptions of who they are in the academy. According to Ivanič (1994), writers’ opportunities, experiences, and encounters are shaped, enabled, and constrained by the social, economic, and cultural factors that reflect different access to discourses and identification with particular social groups. What many students like Mandy typically omit from their discussion of personal writer identities are the elements of access, ethnicity, race, dis/ability, and class that are implicated in identity topics. These are not often part of writing class discourses in U.S. educational institutions. Although some educators would argue that mastering academic discourse is all that is important, part of learning for ESL speakers is acquiring the discourses needed to think and write about complex issues. Responses and corrections that center only on grammatical differences, therefore, too often prove unproductive.

**Implications for Teaching**

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a way to study power relations and the embedded ideologies that shape how ESL students come to understand who they are as writers. Although this case reviews only Mandy’s story, her voice echoes the expressed feelings of other ESL students in my classes. There are a number of strategies I have incorporated into my practice to better accommodate ESL students that other educators may find useful.

Adding expressivist assignments allows for hybridity, a blending of genres and discourses. Discussing writing as a thinking process and not simply as a matter of language accuracy can help students whose language varies from dominant forms and who are contending with a variety of linguistic issues. Spigelman (2000) argued that composition curriculum must shift from its emphasis on product and give students access to the epistemological discussion of competing models of writing, whether they be the classical models of rhetoric, expressivism, or other forms. For example, a research paper can become a position paper when the research is examined and then a personal position is taken on the findings. Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) contend that expressivism is amenable to a critical version of literacy instruction. It can honor the linguistic background ESL students possess and value what they know.

When using a writing workshop, train respondents to focus on ideas in initial readings. Role-play response variety such as pointing, summarizing, and analyzing that can be helpful to writers. Also point out ineffective responses that silence writers without helping them understand what is needed. Emphasize communication that is proficient and effective rather than obsessing over surface structures (Fregeau, 1999), leaving mechanics for a final edit.

Empower students to ask content area professors for models of “good papers” and explicitly discuss how dialect may affect a paper. Teach students that requesting the opportunity to rewrite papers in which language use is an issue is reasonable. If students respond to grades and assignments thinking they present a challenge that can be met by a variety of tactics, they will not be so easily discouraged or silenced. They will be better able to see themselves as writers “in process” rather than “bad writers.”

Writing expectations that are clear and challenging are a reasonable goal, but students who are convinced that they are “bad” writers too often fall victim to the inaction that preys on those convinced that past failures predict future failure. Help by introducing a process discourse and an understanding of multiple drafts focused on clarity of concepts. If teachers stopped evaluating student writing as if it were a finished product of literature, students could learn it is a craft that involves moving a paper to an acceptable form through a process of steps (Murray, 1984).

Acquiring a sociopolitical discourse empowers instructors and students to discuss language differences openly and invites students to discuss sites of conflict, allowing them to stop blaming themselves. A sociopolitical ideology accepts that struggle, conflict, and tensions arise when individuals do not feel included in institutions, and it helps people understand the concept of invisible privilege. Possible discussion starters might include the following: What are traditional beliefs regarding correctness and “good writing”? What is problematic about the teaching of writing “rules” in a decontextualized, depoliticized manner? How can writers (educators) challenge hegemonic “truths”
about what constitutes “good writing”? What should informed writers know about the difference between spoken and written language? What should they know about linguistic variations within communities and in global contexts? Which language forms are privileged and which are not? Why? (For interested teachers, see Reaser and Adger [2007], who have developed a language-awareness curriculum for nonlinguists to assist educators and students in understanding language ideologies and variations.)

Having access to certain discourses enables one to change negative writer identity. Discussion, however, must be explicit. Brodkey (1992) believed that teachers and students can reconstruct themselves in relation to political realities via discursive practices that resist those representations that work against them. Inclusive classrooms are a human rights issue, and viewing difference as a resource rather than an obstacle is a way to help overcome present barriers. It is possible to increase the successful participation of multicultural students by reexaming the policies and practices that leave them marginalized in schools.

My own practice remains “in process.” I explore and exchange ideas with my teacher candidates vis-à-vis critical pedagogical changes in regard to writing and ESL learners. We examine social justice issues in regard to high-stakes writing exams that demand conformity of text from children and revisit our understandings of the academy’s dominant language practices.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication in its 2001 position statement on SL writing and writers (National Council of Teachers of English, 2001) reminds educators that “the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural and educational contexts” (p. 1) and that the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence can take a lifetime. We, as educators, have a responsibility to expand our own awareness regarding the language needs of our ESL students.

References


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