

Exploring Imagined Disciplinary Identity in Future-Scenario Autobiographical L2 Writing

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Abstract

This instrumental case study explored the disciplinary identity of a second-language (L2) writer as she experienced a literary-analysis and L2 fiction-writing workshop that involved imagining and writing about her future life and career. Data were short story drafts before and after the workshop and a post-writing interview. Data analysis consisted of story and transcript analysis through a communities of practice and imagined identities framework, in which actual communal experiences and interactions direct the creative character of imagination and identity negotiation. Results include that revising a short story about an imagined career scenario, while improving the writer's ability to communicate her story's theme fictionally, also self-reportedly prompted a less optimistic expectation of belonging in an imagined community as a Chinese professor in U.S. academia. This case adds nuance to a substantial body of research that describes L2 imaginative writing as mostly motivating and positive, and it urges further study into exactly how motivating or engaging creative or imaginative writing is when it draws on the communicative potential of the short story narrative genre, complemented by literary analysis and workshopping.

Keywords: Second language, creative writing, disciplinary identity

Working in front of my desk for straight 4 hours, from 8 am to 12 pm, I rub my watery eyes and I feel the soreness. My eyesight is worse and worse as my health deteriorates. For ten years, I have gained 50 pounds and lost lots of hair. Who cares? Do I care? . . . Yes, I care but there is more important thing that I have not obtained yet. LOST and ALONE. I tell myself it is normal.

~ excerpt from Zhou Qi's¹ post-workshop short-story revision

¹ Pseudonym

Proof has been mounting in support of incorporating imaginative or creative writing into the second-language (L2) classroom. Benefits of L2 creative writing for L2 learning include greater awareness of English phonemes (Garvin, 2013), vocabulary expansion (Chamcharatsri, 2015; Garvin, 2013; Iida, 2012), more vivid writing (Garvin, 2013), heightened genre awareness (Garvin, 2013; Iida, 2012), establishment of voice (Hanauer, 2015; Iida, 2010; Maxim, 2006), and the emergence of self-empowering identity (Zhao, 2014, 2015). In addition to L2 creative writing representing a relatively positive experience for L2 writers (Hanauer & Liao, 2016), L2 writers may experience lowered inhibition, or increased motivation, while carrying out creative writing tasks (Garvin, 2013; Hanauer, 2010, 2012; Iida, 2012; Newfield & D'Abdon, 2015; Nicholes, 2015b; Zhao, 2015). To build on earlier work, the present study looks at a lesser investigated area in L2 writing—workshop-guided literary analysis and short-story revision and its relationship to disciplinary identity construction.

So far, some of the most influential work on L2 creative writing has investigated poetry (e.g., Chamcharatsri, 2015; Hanauer, 2010, 2015; Iida, 2012). Even more work has considered L2 personal narrative writing or L2 storytelling generally (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Early & Norton, 2012; Ghiso & Low, 2013; Holmes & Marra, 2011; Lee, 2013; Liang, 2015; Simpson, 2011; Weinberg, 2015; Zacharias, 2012). Meanwhile, empirical work on L2 fiction writing is relatively scarce. Among research into L2 fiction writing, Stillar (2012) used textual analysis to see how Japanese L2 writers of English wrote fictionally from first-person viewpoints of imagined marginalized members of Japanese society, reporting that students seemed open to assuming new points of view and of taking on new identities while writing. Looking into cognitive processes, Zhao (2014) found that L2 writers aligned “past experiences with the kind of identities they [saw] as appropriate, liberating, or convenient in the immediate creative writing context” (p.454).

Zhao (2014) used think-aloud protocols and content analysis of student-created short stories to investigate writers' concepts of themselves as writers (see also Zhao, 2015). In these two works above, the concept of identity has more of a self-reflective, cognitive component in terms of raising learner awareness of their own identities and possibly reshaping them, which corresponds with a more psychological construct of a person's sense of self.

In terms of workshops and pedagogy to guide L2 fiction writing instruction, Roberts (2013) initiated literary analysis with students in a fiction-writing workshop to help students with their own short stories, reporting that students saw these workshops as conducive to vocabulary and discussion-skill development. Also arguing in favor of a workshop model, Spiro (2014) described a creative writing pedagogy in which novice L2 writers looked to the work of experienced, practicing

writers to nurture voice through a learning cycle of “student choice of text, the articulation of reasons for their choice, applying their reading insights to writing creative texts of their own, and reflection on the process as part of a writing community” (p. 23). As a published writer of literary novels, short stories, and poetry, I drew on my background as a composer of literary art to follow Spiro’s (2014) model in an earlier paper (Nicholes, 2015b). Specifically, I carried out a classroom workshop sequence involving reading of a short story, analysis of that short story, and arts-based work involving drawing of and creative writing about characters in the story and of the L2 writers themselves (Nicholes, 2015b). Overall, what these creative writing models have in common are (a) an introduction to the symbolic and expressive potentials of literary fiction, (b) a period of student reflection on what students found aesthetically and emotionally moving from the domain of literary writing, and finally (c) a period in which students try to use what they had encountered from the domain for unique, personal aesthetic/semiotic, imaginative expression. It is this three-part model of the creative writing workshop that I have aimed to investigate in the present study.

Imagination and imaginative expression have long been viewed as powerful contributors for language learning and identity construction. In the present paper, I follow the lead of theorists such as Butler (1990), Goffman (1959/1990), and Wenger (1998) in defining identity as performative. Identity performance positions a person, and results from positioning of a person, within and in relation to a community. A person’s positioning can be defined “as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role” (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 14); it also refers to the process by which people present themselves in social action as “observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 38). According to Davies and Harré (1999), people position themselves, although not always in an intentional way, by making use of “categories and storylines,” in a process that may encompass “imaginatively positioning oneself” (p. 37). While navigating positioning, defined here as both a kind of dynamic role and also a process, a person enacts or performs identity. In the present study, performed identity appears in short story drafts written by Zhou Qi.

Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory, drawing on the concept of communities of practice, describes the importance of imagination as a way of “expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (p. 176). In a communities of practice framework, identity develops through negotiation of what our experiences of social membership mean, with this negotiation happening through mutual engagement in more immediate social interactions in specific times and places as well as through imagination (Wenger, 1998). For Wenger (1998), the link between mutual engagement and imagination is a strong one, as the

“creative character of imagination is anchored in social interactions and communal experiences” (p. 178). The term *imagined communities* comes from Anderson (1983/1991), who described it to explain a relatively recent advent of nationalism in humans’ imagination; for Anderson, “[One’s national community] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Following Anderson’s lead, Norton (2013) described imagined communities as “a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future” (p. 13). Norton (2000, 2001, 2013; see also Norton Peirce, 1995) found that a learner invested in learning a language to the extent that the language related to a desired imagined identity. For Norton (2001), “a learner’s imagined community invited an imagined identity” (p. 166). Drawing on these conceptual frameworks, I conclude that exploring imaginative works can be done with the expectation that it offers insight into ways of being, and essentially ways of *belonging*, in specific communities of practice overall.

Autobiographical narratives serve as useful units of analysis for exploring imagined identities defined as they are here as resulting from negotiation of what our experiences of social membership mean and, therefore, how our experiences are meaningful in a particular community of practice. Not only do autobiographical narratives organize how we understand the events of our lives but also they index “the prevailing theories about ‘possible lives’” (Bruner, 2004, p. 694) that may be part of communities of practice. Narratives are made up of storylines accessible in any one community, whether that community is concrete and immediate in space and time (Wenger, 1998) or imagined and distant in space and time (Anderson, 1983/1991). Thus how a writer describes herself in narratives about imagined futures can be expected to correspond with how a writer constructs her imagined identity at the moment of, and through, artistic composition.

In light of previous research and the present discussion of imagination, imagined communities, and imagined identities, this study presents a student’s voice related to the experience of revising a short story about her imagined future.

Methodology

The stories presented below resulted from a process of eliciting short-story writing followed by a one-on-one workshop with the author. The workshop itself featured literary analysis and then revision. The goal of the workshop was to help Qi gain literary expertise to guide revision.

The qualitative tradition of the case study characterizes this study. Following Stake (2000), the case study can be thought of as “not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be

studied” (p. 435). The present study can be described as an instrumental case study, in which the case provides insight into a central phenomenon (Stake, 2000). Here, Qi’s participation and voice offer insight into the experience of L2 creative writing, specifically L2 fiction writing, as a writer gains literary expertise. Specific methodological steps carried out to amplify Qi’s voice were as follows:

1. After Internal Review Board approval was secured (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Log No. 15-298), an interested L2 writer originally from China, referred to with the pseudonym Zhou Qi, responded to a posted advertisement to participate in this research study on a university campus in Western Pennsylvania. Qi gave informed consent, then completed a pre-intervention survey. The survey had been piloted for content validity with three researchers in composition and applied linguistics. The instrument had also been piloted for construct validity by a sample of three L2 writers who were studying at the undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral level of a TESOL program. The writing prompt was as follows: *Imagine yourself using English in the future with another person who also uses English. Write an interesting short story to describe the situation as clearly as possible.* The student had never had formal creative writing training or written literary short stories before.
2. After writing a first draft, Qi met with me to discuss a short story. The short story was Guo Xiaolu’s “Winter Worm, Summer Weed.” We met to discuss how Guo Xiaolu used modes of characterization (description, action, thought, exposition, dialog: D.A.T.E.D.) in service of her story’s theme. After the discussion, Qi was sent a Qualtrics-delivered writing prompt. The prompt first directed her to review a video (Nicholes, 2015a) that recapped our analysis of how Guo Xiaolu used modes of characterization in her short story “Winter Worm, Summer Weed.” After viewing the video, Qi then revised her story using a slightly revised prompt. The second prompt read as follows: *Like you did before, please imagine yourself using English in the future with another person who also uses English. Write an interesting short story to describe the situation as clearly as possible. Try to use D.A.T.E.D. to help the fiction communicate your theme.*
3. Finally, Qi met with me to discuss the choices she made in revising her story.

The study's design, then, involved the collection of pre- and post-intervention short-story data for analysis.

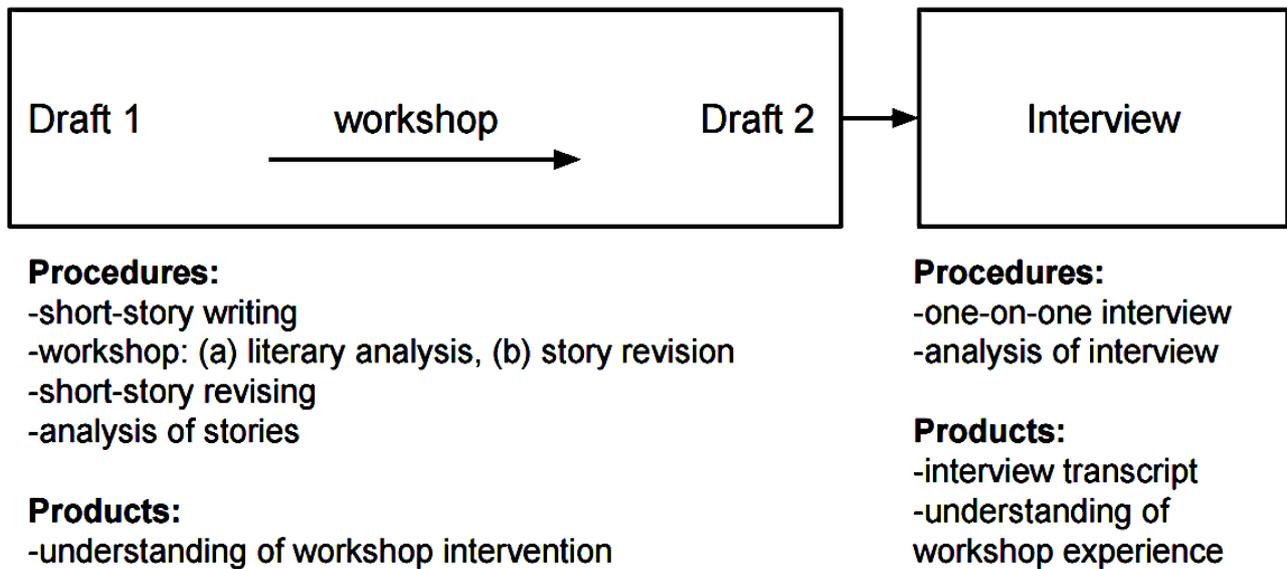


Figure 1. Visual diagram of the procedures of the study.

In the next section, I present Qi's stories, followed by sections in our interview in which she described the experience of writing the stories and experiencing the literary-analysis and creative writing workshop.

Results

Pre-Workshop Draft

It is the time for my class (ENGL 202). I step into the class right at 8:30am on Monday.

"Dr. Zhou, How was your weekend?" It is Jason, an American boy from Pittsburgh and he is one of the students in my class who is talkative and outgoing in class.

"I graded the research papers that you guys turned in last week, and I was beaten by that," I reply wryly to the student.

"Oh, I hope that is not my paper. It might be Tom's," he is smiling and pointing to Tom who is unaware of our conversation and turns up his face when he hears his name mentioned by someone.

"What happens. Does anyone call my name?"

"You are fine, Tom. We were talking about the research paper," I smiled and replied.

Tom goes back to his textbook and his face turns red.

"Ok, everyone. Time for the class, Let us spend some time talking about the research paper first . . ." The class goes on well as always.

Post-Workshop Draft

Working in front of my desk for straight 4 hours, from 8 am to 12 pm, I rub my watery eyes and I feel the soreness. My eyesight is worse and worse as my health deteriorates. For ten years, I have gained 50 pounds and lost lots of hair. Who cares? Do I care? . . . Yes, I care but there is more important thing that I have not obtained yet. LOST and ALONE. I tell myself it is normal. No sacrifice, no gain.

But now my body turns on the signal and warns me to take a break.

“Alright, time for a break. I need the break and I deserve it!”

I lift my hands to rub my face which is so dry, listless, and old. I am only 30 but look like already 40s. I stand up away from the lethal radiation (the computer) which destroys my face with acnes. Is everything worthwhile?! A question I ask every day but I always give myself hope. As long as I am working hard enough, everything will be paid back. Right? Then I would add, as long as I am happy and satisfied, I am willing to face the FATE. Comfort is needed.

I walk back and forth in my little, tiny, disordered office, no my HOME where I cried, laughed, and worked again. A patch of sunlight sneaks into my office and allures me to open the window. I come close to the wall and tip-toe. The window is so high that my index finger can barely touch. Finally, a wisp of wind gently touches my face. I feel better now, “Thank you.” My eyes are watery again and I murmur to the world outside my office. A wall. Two worlds. At least, I am safe here.

“You know what the spicy chicken . . .” Noises are in the hall. Students are discussing their meals. My clock “shouts.” I have four clocks, each of which has different functions. The shouting one has the shape of a dog which reminds me of time for the class. I grab my glasses and sort out the papers. Before I leave my office, I look at the mirror and push back my hair, disturbed by the wind. Everything will be fine.

I step into the class (ENGL 674). There are still five minutes for the class. Students keep coming into the class.

“Dr. Zhou, how was your weekend?” it is Jason, an American boy from Pittsburgh who is always smiling and talkative. He makes me feel safe.

“I was beaten by your research paper,” I reply wryly to the student. I know he will not take that personally. But not all the students are like him. Sometimes I need to be cautious.

“Oh, are you kidding? That must be not mine.” He laughs with perceptible embarrassment, but soon he points to another student, “It must be Tom’s. Hey, Tom, be ready. You are ruined.” He always like to make fun of other students.

Tom, a shy, assiduous student who does not talk a lot in the class and kind of reminding me of myself as a student, is unaware of our conversation and turns up his face when he hears someone calls his name.

“Leave him alone, Jason. Tom, you are okay. We are just chatting,” I chime in and spare him from embarrassment. Tom goes back to his textbook and his cheeks turn red.

“Ok, everyone, I believe it is time for our class, and we have a lot to do today.” I look at my watch and announce the class. But students are still talking . . .

“Time for class,” I yell to them . . . in my imagination. Maybe I should wait. Five minutes pass . . .

“Time for class.” It is my third time repeating myself now . . . Class has started, kids . . . Class really starts . . .

I try to tell myself. Everything is worthwhile as long as I persist but for how long? Maybe God knows.

Discussion

Qi’s story changed qualitatively during the study. In Qi’s first draft, a young woman carries on playful exchanges with her students before the beginning of a university-level writing class. In the second draft, however, character thought as well as metaphoric details related to the story’s setting create a much more troubled, divided main character. These changes darkened the mood of what previously appeared as innocent, seemingly carefree exchanges with students.

When I asked Qi about her experience with the revision process, she explained her understanding of her thinking before and after the workshop²:

[7:17]

- | | | |
|----|----|--|
| 80 | Q; | my ability to speak English is my identity. |
| 81 | | If I speak English well, you know, um, |
| 82 | | I might be more easily accepted |
| 83 | | by my colleagues or students. |
| 84 | | Um ... (3.0) |
| 85 | | I don’t know actually after I started your, you know, study, |

² Transcription conventions: [] = overlapping speech; () = pause duration; . = falling intonation at end of line; ? = rising intonation at end of line; @ = pulse of laughter.

86 I kind of, wondering,
 87 do I still?
 88 Before, uh.
 89 Sorry my mind is [just like a mess]
 90 JUSTIN; [No no, go ahead go ahead]
 91 QI; Um ...(4.0)
 92 After started the story, uh, the study
 93 I wrote the story kind of make me to think
 94 ...(2.0) is it really ...(1.5) good for me to stay in the United States.
 95 I, I realize there will be a lot of challenges,
 96 even though I speak very good English.
 97 But you know my appearance is still here,
 98 my face is still Asian face.

For Qi, writing vividly about a future scenario may have led to revision of that future. Vivid writing may have raised doubts in relation to how she looks, and how others may position her, in an imagined community of practice. These doubts seem to relate to what she described as her Asian appearance in perhaps a predominantly White or at least mostly non-“Asian” future imagined community. As such, she seems to have self-positioned through fictive characterization as more distanced from her imagined community of practice.

In the course of our discussion, Qi mentioned going back and forth in her mind while thinking about her future. In the follow excerpt, I asked for clarification about when this kind of thinking happened.

[11:19.2]

157 JUSTIN; Did this happen
 158 when you wrote the first time?
 159 or in [revising?]
 160 QI; [actually] the second time.
 161 The first time?
 162 ...(2.0) you know, I feel like I’m more positive, about, my future life in the
 Uni@ted St@ates.
 163 But for second part, the second, after I revised it?
 164 I add more details,
 165 I, I feel like I have more personal attachment to that piece,
 166 I feel like I have more feelings in the second, uh, writing.

More vivid thinking about future scenarios through the symbolic and expressive potential of literary fiction, here, may also be associated with greater emotional expenditure in the writing.

Qi's life experiences and personal interactions during the study also self-reportedly contributed to how she imagined her future. During our post-workshop discussion, she made reference to a mentor, an associate professor of English, who was also Asian.

[12:33]

- 182 QI; But whenever I look at her,
183 I feel like, imagine myself.
184 JUSTIN; @@
185 QI; And uh ...(2.0) her image?
186 Kind of ...(2.0) reflect my fu@ture i@mage,
187 I don't know why because she's, she, she also has a Asian face.
188 But she came to the United States much earlier than me,
189 and she was a professor right now
190 but she still need to do a lot of work a lot of effort and to negotiate her
identity.
191 She was, she's an American but she still need to negotiate her identity.

Here, Qi reported that she used her mentor as a sort of mirror to imagine her own future. Qi reported that what was difficult for her talented and accomplished mentor could only be more difficult for her.

In sum, the experience of working on a revision of a fictive narrative about this L2 writer's imagined future involved more vivid imagining, which may have also involved visualizing complications to what seems to have been a more positive, happily naïve first draft.

Conclusion

The fiction writing workshop impacted how vividly Qi imagined her future life. Qi reported seeing the challenge of being a professor of English in the U.S. as daunting in a possibly unkind imagined community. Between the first and second draft of the story, and after a workshop with an experienced creative writer that involved literary analysis and guided revision, Qi self-reportedly invested more emotion into her imagined, fictionalized future—and with that investment also seems to have come a markedly less positive experience and less positive positioning and construction of an imagined identity.

This case study presents Qi's voice, and, in doing so, it nuances a growing body of L2 creative writing literature that has so far explained L2 creative writing as a mostly positive and motivating experience for writers (e.g., Garvin, 2013; Hanauer, 2010, 2012; Hanauer & Liao, 2016; Iida, 2012; Newfield & D'Abdon, 2015; Nicholes, 2015b; Zhao, 2015). This study offers support for further research that focuses on how individual writers experience creative writing, with focus on intersections of history, discipline, and identity. It also supports research into how life experiences involving interactions with cultural and societal discourses of exclusion may be thought about more vividly through the thinking capacity of literary and artistic conventions.

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