Immigrant/Learner, Affiliate, Author, Expert:
The Intersections of L2 Writing, Identity, and Computer-Mediated Communication

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ABSTRACT

As technology continues to shape our interactions in both personal and educational contexts, the exploration of how computer-mediated communication (CMC) may impact the development of second language writing skills has received greater interest. While a growing body of research has investigated potential applications of this technology within second language (L2) classrooms, the voluntary writing practices of L2 writers—where and what they choose to write outside of academic domains—are relatively uncharted as yet. This review of the literature seeks to identify the many CMC contexts in which L2 writers situate themselves, their purposes for engaging these online audiences, and the social roles or identities that emerge through their chosen writing activities. Previous studies indicate that social media platforms and other online communities indeed promote learners' experimentation with identity, group membership, and language with apparent gains in writer confidence and motivation; however, establishing a clear link between CMC and literacy development, as well as determining how computer-based writing can be meaningfully integrated into academic settings, remain directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Technology increasingly informs our relationship with the world around us and, more than ever before, allows us to share our experiences and ideas with others while minimizing the physical, cultural, and social distances that separate us. Over the past decade, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a fixture in our daily lives, shaping the ways in which we connect and interact with both local and global communities through text messaging, email, and social media, and evolving into an essential—and sometimes preferred—medium of discourse.

As the use of CMC becomes more prevalent in both personal and educational contexts, greater attention has been turned to investigating its role in language learning. New bodies of research have grown around the potential applications of CMC technologies in existing English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms, the development of distance learning classes that are realized entirely online, and the effects of CMC on language learners' literacy skills, among other topics of interest. While the internet provides multimodal means of

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communication, including graphics, video, and voice chat, CMC is still often thought of in terms of its text-based forms. For this reason, we will focus our attention on the relationship between computer-mediated communication and second language (L2) writing, with a specific concentration on how the social nature of CMC influences the exploration, construction, and projection of identity for second language writers.

Much research has been devoted to defining and conceptualizing identity in second language writing, but relatively little is understood about how the almost-limitless access and agency granted to these developing writers through the culture of social media might affect the construction of such identities, especially in out-of-school contexts. Essentially, how does writing in CMC contexts shape the identities of second language writers, both in how they perceive themselves and in what they project to others? Understanding more about these voluntary, computer-mediated writing practices (i.e., *what* and *how* language learners choose to write in the target language on their own time) may provide invaluable information about the various identities students bring to their writing, as well as new ideas for how to approach writing instruction in the classroom. This review of the literature seeks to index the variety of CMC tools L2 writers make use of and for what purposes, to identify specific features of CMC that contribute to learners' exploration and construction of identities, and, ultimately, to explore the implications of online identity and literacy work on the development of second language writing skills, both within and outside of the classroom.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In his analysis of the cumulative research regarding L2 writing, Silva (1993) determined that it is "strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically" distinct from the writing one produces in their first language (L1) (p. 669). Similarly, Kaplan's (1966) influential work in exploring cultural thought patterns and how they are reflected in writing suggests that these L1-L2 differences are not limited to salient features like mechanics and language use but extend to broader concerns such as the organization of ideas, the writer's relationship with their audience, and how one conceptualizes writing and its purpose. In this way, writing can be situated as not only a means of communication but also as a way of thinking; as such, we must recognize that the unique social and cultural variables that make up a language learner's reality influence the identities they carry into and enact in their texts.

Conceptualizing identity in L2 writing

Because the majority of second language writers have achieved some degree of literacy in their L1 before they engage in L2 writing, Hirvela and Belcher (2001) note that L2 writers are, importantly, "not voiceless or devoid of writerly identity when they enter our classrooms" (p. 84). However, the definition of "writerly identity" and how it can properly be recognized in texts remains widely contested in the field of composition studies as well as in second language writing. It has long been associated with the equally ambiguous term *voice*, which Hirvela and Belcher (2001) present as problematic because the ways in which it is conceptualized range from a sense of authorial presence to the unique style a writer cultivates through lexical and grammatical choices. Overall, research in L2 writing has increasingly turned to sociocultural and

poststructuralist perspectives regarding identity construction—that is, the idea that writing is a social practice; that identity formation therein must be considered in light of the writer's particular social, cultural, and historical contexts; and that written discourse has the power to shape reality in terms of our sense of self and our position in the world.

Ivanič (1998), Ivanič and Camps (2001), and Gee (2000, 2008) all emphasize the "plurality, fluidity and complexity" of writers' identities while proposing different lenses through which to characterize them (Ivanič, 1998, p. 11). Ivanič (1998) delineates the primary aspects of writer identity as: the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, and the self as author. The *autobiographical self* encompasses the internal identity, as shaped by linguistic and sociocultural background and previous life experiences or writing practices that writers carry with them into their texts. The *discoursal self* is the persona a writer knowingly or unknowingly projects through the discoursal choices s/he makes. Finally, the *self as author* is the degree to which a writer positions him/herself as an author or an authority within a text. While Ivanič (1998) developed these categorizations specifically in reference to L2 academic writing, their relevance to current research in the field as well as their overall clarity mark them as helpful guidelines for the purposes of our analysis, even in our discussion of out-of-school L2 writing practices and identity construction.

To better address the socially-constructed dimension of writer identity, we reference Ivanič and Camps's (2001) notion of interpersonal positioning and Gee's (2000) description of affinity groups. While *interpersonal positioning*, like the self as author construct, conveys a sense of how a writer views their own authority, it more broadly describes the perceived relationship and power dynamics between writer and audience. The relationship between L2 writers and their instructors—often their prescribed audience—may be strikingly different from the relationship they cultivate with the audiences they engage through voluntary writing. L2 writers seeking an audience online, whether through social media activity or participation in fan communities, may discover and align themselves with certain *affinity groups*, or social groups that form around common interests and objectives (Gee, 2000). According to Gee (2000), membership in affinity groups is defined by participation, an act that may be made easier by the participatory culture that dominates most CMC writing contexts.

Potential impacts of CMC on L2 writing

Jenkins (2009) characterizes *participatory culture* by its "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and… [formation of communities] in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (p. 3). By providing these additional supports and outlets for L2 writing, CMC may encourage developing writers to experiment more with the form, style, and genre of texts they produce and, in turn, with the identities they adopt or construct online.

Aside from increased participation and agency, discussions about the ways in which text-based CMC may foster language learning have centered on its multimodality, its ability to merge elements of both conversational and traditionally written discourse, and its grounding in sociocultural theory. Warschauer (1997) argues that CMC has "unleashed the interactive power of text-based communication" and that its inherently social and collaborative nature grants language learners more opportunities to produce and reflect upon the target language in a way

that could lead to L2 development and acquisition (p. 472). CMC allows L2 writers to access larger, cross-cultural audiences unconstrained by the academic discourse and institutional expectations that characterize most ESL/EFL classrooms and, in doing so, prompts them to "negotiate new roles and identities" through this online socialization (Kern, 2006, p. 197). The variety of interactional websites accessible through the internet provide countless options for reinvention and self-definition as developing L2 writers encounter communities beyond their usual physical and sociocultural contexts. Crucially, CMC may offer a novel element of choice to second language writers that alters how they engage in writing, how they perceive writing in the target language, and potentially how they position themselves as a writer or author in the L2.

Because of this diversity in available digital media, it is important to contextualize our discussion of identity construction in these settings by first examining what CMC tools L2 writers choose to use, and for what purposes.

TRENDS OF USE AMONG OUT-OF-SCHOOL L2 WRITERS ONLINE

Although the empirical studies featured in this literature review cannot wholly capture the extent of in- or out-of-school writing practices that language learners may engage in, even this small sampling demonstrates the breadth of resources and audiences available to them through the internet. L2 writers are found connecting and communicating through text and online messaging (Tan & Richardson, 2006), discussion boards (Spiliotopoulos & Carey, 2005), online journals or blogs (Chen & Brown, 2012; Yi & Hirvela, 2010), social networking sites like Facebook (Chen, 2013), and fanfiction or fan sites (Black, 2006; Jwa, 2012; Lam, 2000), among other text-based platforms.

While conducting a larger cross-sectional study of identity representation in academic writing, Tan and Richardson (2006) became interested in the out-of-school writing practices of students at an urban secondary school in Penang, Malaysia. The 31 participants comprised a Year 10 class aspiring to careers in science or engineering and known for its strong English language abilities. Over six months, the researchers collected examples of participants' out-of-school English messages and participants' impressions of the motivations behind their voluntary writing practices through semi-structured interviews and other informal interactions with the class.

Initial interviews with the participants revealed that they collectively engaged in using text and online messaging to chat with each other outside of school, as well as through exchanging handwritten notes. A total of 310 messages (122 online chat messages, 105 text messages, 83 notes) were transcribed from memory by the participants during these interviews, and the researchers analyzed the linguistic content of the reproduced messages for evidence of participants' motivations for writing as well as for how their discoursal choices informed or conveyed a sense of identity. The language found in the CMC messages often revolved around informal conversations about school and pop culture, invitations to hang out, and playful teasing of each other. According to Tan and Richardson (2006), these findings, supplemented by participants' contributions in follow-up interviews, indicated that students wrote "to maintain friendship ties, to overcome boredom, and… to fulfill their need for meaningful communication" (p. 337). Importantly, all messages featured frequent instances of language hybridity, representing not only the complex linguistic and sociocultural situation in Malaysia but also the strong sense of community these participants cultivated as users of Penang English.

Interviews with participants emphasized the special connection the class felt to Penang English, a specific subset of Malaysian English characterized by the way it punctuates English with words or linguistic markers from other commonly spoken languages (e.g., Bahasa Melayu, Hokkien) and elements of chat speak (e.g., abbreviations like *u* and *b4*). While participants' communal identity was already conveyed through references to their shared classes and a lack of established cliques within the wider group, this exclusive use of Penang English in their CMC messages to each other further solidifies their identity as a unified social and linguistic affinity group. Interestingly, the prominent role that Penang English plays in these students' real lives as well as in their voluntary writing seems to bridge Ivanič's (1998) autobiographical and discoursal selves, suggesting that, while it may be necessary to unpack the monolithic term identity, its constituent parts may still be more intertwined than separate, particularly in the case of out-of-school L2 writing.

Because Tan and Richardson (2006) did not distinguish between CMC messages and handwritten notes in their analysis, we have no direct comparison of the linguistic and discoursal features of texts produced by L2 writers in these different formats. This could indicate that there were few significant variations between the two; however, further research would be needed in order to determine how the medium of discourse influences such things as form or construction of writer identity. Furthermore, the manner in which the researchers collected their data—asking participants to remember and record messages they had previously written rather than compiling authentic samples from phones or computers—hinders the validity of their analysis and conclusions because it depends upon participants' memories and their willingness to share personal communiques without editing. Thus, the data presented here may not be a complete or necessarily accurate tabulation of participants' out-of-school writing activities, though it still provides some insight into how and why these L2 writers choose to communicate online.

Tan and Richardson (2006) primarily focus on how identity can be co-constructed among L2 writers through their CMC interactions, with little-to-no mention of any individual identities represented within the larger whole. In contrast, the case studies of Yi and Hirvela (2010) and Chen (2013) offer a more intimate view of language learners writing online and portray CMC as a site for L2 writers to practice not just language hybridity but cultural hybridity as well.

Yi and Hirvela's (2010) six-month case study of Elizabeth, a 1.5 generation Korean-American high school student, investigated the out-of-school—or *self-sponsored*, a term that highlights the individual and her agency—writing practices and choices she makes in terms of medium, genre, and purpose of writing. Because Elizabeth considered herself a native speaker of both languages and spent equal time in the Korean and American education systems, this study brings to the forefront the "dual lives," or multiplicity of identities, that 1.5 generation, as well as second language, writers must often navigate due to their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds (Yi & Hirvela, 2010, p. 95).

The researchers collected qualitative data about Elizabeth's writing by coding samples of the texts she produced for topic, motivation for writing, choice of language and medium, and the intended audience. Additional information about Elizabeth's attitudes toward her writing and sense of identity was provided by weekly records of her voluntary writing activities and weekly semi-structured interviews. These records showed that Elizabeth engaged in a variety of print- and computer-based writing activities, ranging from making to-do lists to writing notes to friends, though most of her attention was devoted to diary writing.

The researchers found that Elizabeth kept three diaries in total, each with a specific purpose and audience in mind: a physical print-based diary, an online Korean language diary,

and an online English language diary. Yi and Hirvela (2010) suggest that Elizabeth consciously differentiated between these diaries based on what she wanted to communicate and with whom she wanted to communicate. Her private print-based diary, by Elizabeth's own admission, was reserved for "the pursuit of more individual and internal purposes" that she did not want to share with a broader audience (Yi & Hirvela, 2010, p. 100). Because she also shared personal thoughts in the public domain of her English and Korean language diaries (or, more accurately, blogs), the researchers propose that her print diary may have acted as a rehearsal space from which Elizabeth later selected what was appropriate to share with her peers. The use of a private rehearsal space implies Elizabeth's deliberate—whether conscious or unconscious—mediation of what aspects of herself to present to her social groups online, along with establishing a distinct division, based on intended audience, between print-based and computer-based communication and representations of self.

Elizabeth's Korean and English blogs allowed her to access two different linguistic and sociocultural peer groups simultaneously, mirroring the way she straddled these two languages and cultures in her daily life. While Elizabeth targeted specific audiences through her choice of what language to write in, analysis of her postings showed that she focused on similar topics, namely her thoughts relating to school life, on both blogs. In both cases, she seems to be seeking affiliation with and recognition from her peers by writing about experiences they can all relate to. Over time, Yi and Hirvela (2010) noted Elizabeth's increasing preference for her Korean language blog, which was used to connect with friends in Korea and fellow Korean-Americans, a move that signaled her growing association with the other Korean-American students at her high school. The careful way in which Elizabeth determined what information to include in her online writings, as well as the way she separated her English- and Korean-speaking audiences, suggests that the establishment of affinity groups and the cultivation of a sense of belonging may be important functions of CMC.

Similarly, Chen's (2013) longitudinal case study monitored the Facebook accounts of two Chinese graduate students in order to analyze the types of posts made, the languages used, and the social roles or identities projected by their messages. The study's participants, Jane and Cindy, were respectively pursuing degrees in applied linguistics and Chinese linguistics at an American university. Chen (2013) collected both quantitative data and qualitative impressions of all Facebook posts made within a two-year period, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with Jane and Cindy to contextualize her analysis with the participants' own insights about their CMC activity.

Despite similarities in Jane and Cindy's linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds—in other words, Ivanič's (1998) notion of the autobiographical self—the two approached Facebook with vastly different purposes and perceptions of the site in mind, as evidenced by the content and language of their posts. Of Cindy's total 166 posts, 113 (68%) were written in Mandarin and 53 (32%) were written in English. Of Jane's total 135 posts, 133 (99%) were written in English and two (1%) were written in Mandarin. Both participants demonstrated increased Facebook use over time as they settled into their graduate programs, with Cindy overall favoring status updates (i.e., general life updates and personal thoughts) and Jane favoring information sharings (i.e., links to external information such as articles, videos, and other websites).

In interviews with Chen (2013), Jane indicated that her preference for information sharings was influenced by her own observations of how American friends used Facebook, saying, "I think about my audiences a lot. I only share information what may be interesting for

them" (p. 152). Like Elizabeth, Jane displayed conscious strategizing when writing for her peers by choosing only certain information to share, a move that seems to be motivated by a desire for affiliation and enacted by "participation in specific practices" that will enable her membership in the group (Gee, 2000, p. 105). The striking contrast between Jane's near-exclusive use of English and Cindy's preference for Mandarin also speaks to the different ways in which they view their audiences and seek to engage with them. Both characterized Facebook as an "English-occupied space" in interviews; however, Cindy mediates that environment by addressing her American and Chinese social groups as two distinct audiences—similar to Elizabeth—whereas Jane consolidates her various affinity groups into a single, multilingual audience reachable through English alone (Chen, 2013, p. 154).

These observed interpersonal positionings, or how L2 writers frame their own authority and relationships with their audiences, directly correlate with Jane and Cindy's respective levels of (dis)comfort with communicating in English and their cultural identities. Chen (2013) notes that Cindy, who primarily associated with other Chinese students in her program, continually positioned herself as an English language learner whereas Jane, who seemed to have a more diverse friend group, increasingly positioned herself as an English language *user*. In terms of identity development over time, Cindy increasingly presented herself as culturally Chinese and, to a lesser extent, as a grad student or teacher in her Facebook posts. In contrast, Jane's references to her Chinese identity, as well as to generalized American or global culture, decreased as postings about local culture and her professional identity increased.

Chen's (2013) case study, as well as the work of Tan and Richardson (2006) and Yi and Hirvela (2010), reflects the dynamism of L2 writer identity and how it continually develops over time in response to the particular sociocultural contexts, perceptions about and attitudes towards the target language, and CMC platforms in which it is situated. Notably, the participants in each of these studies chose different digital media for their voluntary writing activities, perhaps exploiting the unique features of those platforms to purposefully foreground or background certain aspects of their identities in the process. These studies were somewhat limited by their narrow focus on participants' writing and social practices within a single CMC platform instead of investigating how L2 writing and representations of identity might change *across* various CMC contexts, and how that disparity might affect learners. A comparison of how these writers' representations of their autobiographical and discoursal selves manifest in both out-of-school and academic writing could also be a potentially valuable direction for future research. However, these studies illustrate that L2 users writing online broadly engaged in the maintenance of existing real-world relationships and the deliberate negotiation and projection of different identities for different audiences. Specifically, the use of CMC allowed these writers to explore and extend communal as well as personal identities as created through their participation in chosen affinity groups.

REWRITING L2 IDENTITY IN THE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE OF CMC

One of the central features of CMC is the access it provides to innumerable communities—defined by shared languages, cultures, interests, or all of the above—beyond the ones L2 writers socialize with in real life. Creativity, mutual support, and social interaction are prominent elements of Jenkins's (2009) notion of participatory culture and are similarly

prominent in most text-based CMC contexts, particularly in the platforms used by fan communities to create content inspired by the films, television shows, books, or music that members share a passionate interest in. If language learners do indeed tend to "engage more deeply with popular culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks," these fan spaces could become powerful sites of experimentation and learning for L2 writers (Jenkins, 2009, p. 9). Although the internet can be accessed in many languages, English remains dominant in pop culture and fan-based discourse, meaning that knowledge of the language is essentially a prerequisite for participating in online fan culture in any meaningful way.

Lam's (2000) case study of a 1.5 generation Chinese-American high school student provided one of the earliest examinations of how writing in English online might influence a language learner's membership in various social groups or fan-based discourse communities and his perception of his own identity as an L2 writer. Almon emigrated from Hong Kong to the United States at age 12 and, despite his long-term residency, expressed continued feelings of marginalization due to his status as a non-native English speaker and his self-described "insufficient" English skills (Lam, 2000, p. 466). He regularly used the internet for messaging and emailing with international friends he had discovered through CMC, as well as for the creation of a fansite for his favorite Japanese pop star.

Analysis of logged chat excerpts, emails, and interviews conducted throughout the six-month study indicated that Almon's conception of himself as a writer of English shifted over time, advancing from a place of alienation to one of confidence in his ability to express himself and connect with an audience of peers who understood and supported him. In particular, the fansite he created positioned him as a knowledgeable authority in the online Japanese pop community; therefore, for perhaps the first time, Almon was able to adopt an expert role through his use of English and, at least temporarily, rewrite the power dynamics that had previously left him marginalized by his real-world audiences. Through socializing with these new communities of peers online, an affinity groups he lacked access to in his physical community, Almon was better able to explore and (re)construct his multilingual, multicultural self by exercising the powerful self as author aspect of this identity. Lam's (2000) case study indicates that CMC can be a potent tool for both identity construction and improved self-confidence in the target language by offering L2 writers more agency and increased opportunities to play with interpersonal positioning; however, the study fails to address whether Almon's positive experiences with English online translated meaningfully to his real-world or classroom contexts.

Just as Lam (2000) noted the improved confidence Almon had in his writing after engaging with a fan community, Black (2006) documented the increased "confidence and motivation for continued writing and language learning" of an L2 fanfiction writer (p. 174). *Fanfiction* is the term for texts created by fans "appropriating… characters and narratives" from films, television, books, and other popular culture media and "making them their own" by reimagining or expanding the existing material (Black, 2006, p. 173). For L2 writers, fanfiction provides an opportunity to experiment with long-form storytelling and publish their work in a public forum that encourages feedback and extensive interaction between the writer and readers.

Part of a larger ethnographic study examining the online writing and social practices of English language learners, Black's (2006) case study focused on an adolescent 1.5 generation Chinese-Canadian writing fanfiction in English. Within two years of immigrating to Canada, Nanako became an avid reader of Japanese anime-based fanfiction and joined Fanfiction.net, the largest online fanfiction archive, in order to begin writing and posting her own stories. Black (2006) used discourse analysis to identify and describe the thematic and structural patterns of

Nanako's fanfiction related to her projections of identity, language, and culture. Additional qualitative data were collected from the reader feedback Nanako received on her stories, the author's notes (A/Ns) she often included at the beginning of new chapters, and the researcher's own online interactions with Nanako.

Analysis of these stories and A/Ns revealed that Nanako explicitly identified herself as a non-native speaker of English and requested feedback on her writing by including the missive "Read and Review!" when she posted new work (Black, 2006, p. 176). Like Almon, Nanako also leveraged her interest in and knowledge of Japanese culture to position herself as an informed member of the fan community, her chosen affinity group. She incorporated occasional Japanese phrases into her fiction and into the interactions she had with readers through her A/Ns, a practice that extended to her L1, Mandarin, after reader reviews indicated an interest in learning more about her linguistic and cultural background. Writing stories about *Card Captor Sakura*, an anime set in Japan but comprising several characters of Chinese origin, allowed Nanako to selectively integrate her L1 into English texts while providing her own English translations for readers unfamiliar with romanized Chinese. Nanako's acknowledgement of and facility with her multilingual identity was met with enthusiasm by readers, especially fellow Mandarin speakers who showed an increased interest in connecting with her in light of their shared linguistic background. Such positive responses to both Nanako's stories and the language(s) she used to tell them sent a clear message that "skill with multiple languages… is valued in this space" and could be interpreted as external validation of her autobiographical self, her discoursal self, and the authority she brought to her texts through her combined knowledge of anime, Japanese culture, and several community-relevant languages (Black, 2006, p.179).

Similarly, Jwa (2012) conducted a case study of two teenage Filipinas writing fanfiction online. Like Nanako, Amy and Julie were English language learners who posted fanfiction about Japanese anime and Korean dramas on Fanfiction.net. At the time that Jwa (2012) analyzed the linguistic and discoursal features of their stories, A/Ns, and reader reviews, Amy had been writing and posting works for one year, and Julie had been writing and posting for five years.

Despite writing fanfiction for the same series, Jwa (2012) found that Amy and Julie had significantly different approaches to the source material. Amy's stories were more strongly situated in *canon*, or the officially accepted settings, characterizations, and plotlines of a given fictional universe, whereas Julie was more likely to break away from established conventions to envision new scenes or explore aspects of the characters that were not included in the original work. Jwa (2012) partially attributes this difference to Amy's relative lack of writing experience compared to Julie, although he also notes that the act of writing fanfiction hinges on reinterpretation, drawing on a writer's personality, worldviews, and sociocultural context by its very nature. The content and linguistic choices made by L2 fanfiction writers, therefore, are directly informed by their unique autobiographical selves.

These composition decisions can further be influenced by audience responses to the discoursal identities L2 writers project in their texts. While neither Amy nor Julie referenced their cultural or linguistic backgrounds as explicitly as Nanako did, their interactions with readers through A/Ns and reader reviews similarly influenced the types of feedback they received and the subsequent style or narrative of their stories. Jwa (2012) observed that Amy's A/Ns projected a sense of lower confidence in her writing, as she used them to address the potential lack of clarity of her plot and characterization choices for readers. In response, she received feedback "merely intended to encourage her to continue" rather than deeper critiques of her language and storytelling (Jwa, 2012, p. 331). Julie, on the other hand, received much more

constructive criticism and requests for the continued development of her ideas and characters from her readers, a response seemingly engendered by the self-reflectivity featured in her A/Ns that revealed her interest and investment in truly exploring new ways of approaching the organization, mood, plot, and characterization of her stories. Whether this feedback actually affects the quality of L2 writers' fanfiction is a question addressed in a later section of this literature review, but Black's (2006) and Jwa's (2012) case studies demonstrate that the extensive peer-to-peer interaction embedded in fanfiction and fan culture communities "not only promotes the writer's affiliation with his or her audience but also guides the overall direction of his or her fanfiction writing" (Jwa, 2012, p. 331).

Lam (2000), Black (2006), and Jwa (2012) show that language learners can become popular and successful creators and contributors to online fan communities, indicating that these participatory cultures provide valuable out-of-school spaces for L2 writers to both practice writing and explore various aspects of their identities through interpersonal positioning. The multiple social roles available in fan discourse—author, reader, community member, expert— can prove especially (trans)formative for those navigating multilingual and multicultural identities, as they are no longer restricted to the roles of English language learner or immigrant. The heightened interaction with like-minded audiences, emphasis on creativity and active participation, and freedom from the "prescriptive conventions" of academia that characterize these spaces appear to lend confidence to and empower L2 writers while simultaneously embracing their linguistic and cultural backgrounds—Nanako, the focal participant in Black's (2006) case study, is even socially rewarded for her use of language hybridity in her works (Jwa, 2012, p. 333).

Although these researchers report increased confidence, motivation to use and learn English, and (potentially) improved writing skills among the subjects of their studies, their failure to address how these L2 writers themselves perceived changes in their identities or in the ways in which they positioned themselves in discourse seems like a missed opportunity. Despite communicating with Almon and Nanako throughout their studies, Lam (2000) and Black (2006) make little mention of whether these participants recognize the influence participation in fan culture seemingly has on the discoursal personas they adopt—author, expert in Japanese culture—or on the quality of their writing. While comparing participants' online texts against academic writing samples may have been considered outside of the scope of these studies, we also lack an understanding of whether these newly-powerful personas and self-confidence as multilingual writers extend to real-world social and educational contexts. Ultimately, the participatory culture of CMC appears promising, but more research is needed to determine how it specifically promotes L2 writing practices and whether any benefits can be replicated in more traditional or academic writing contexts.

COMPUTER-MEDIATED WRITING AND L2 IDENTITY IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

While our concentration has thus far remained fixed on the voluntary, out-of-school writing practices of English language learners, it is also important to consider how issues of second language writing, identity, and the use of CMC technology may coalesce in ESL/EFL classrooms themselves. A growing body of research has been devoted to potential applications of CMC in language classrooms and its effects on L2 acquisition; however, the effects of CMC

technology and identity positioning in L2 academic writing remain underrepresented. In examining the various roles language learners adopt in classroom CMC tasks and how they interpret interpersonal positioning in relation to an academic audience, we may better understand how to validate and empower our students' cultivation of multifaceted identities.

Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005) examined how L2 student identities can be formed or influenced by completing writing tasks and responding to other students' posts on an online discussion board. Eighteen adult ESL students in an advanced academic writing class in British Columbia used a WebCT discussion board to post weekly reflective journal entries about a variety of topics—e.g., their home cultures, academic writing, technology, personal identity—and respond to other students' entries as part of their required coursework for the semester. These written exchanges were coded to identify the different roles that students adopted in their interactions with each other, and further data regarding participants' views about their identities as L2 writers were collected via one-on-one interviews.

Analysis of the discussion board posts suggested that these students, like the L2 writers who contributed to fan culture websites, adopted many different social roles or identities in their interactions with each other: author, reader, editor, advisor, language learner, and so forth. Alongside this development of complex individual identities, Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005) observed the emergence of a stronger collective identity as students learned more about each other and formed deeper relationships by sharing their writing. Although these shifting interpersonal positionings were apparent to the researchers, many students expressed feeling only slight changes in their identity—referring specifically to their sense of cultural identity—in interviews (Spiliotopoulos & Carey, 2005, p. 98). Still, data from both the discussion board posts and student interviews indicated that, as a discourse medium, CMC could contribute to students spending more time expressing themselves, exploring new identities, reaching larger audiences of their peers, and developing a greater sense of camaraderie and community than traditional classrooms might.

Concerned that ESL/EFL students do not have access to real-world, authentic English-speaking audiences within their classrooms, Chen and Brown (2012) investigated the effects of task-based CMC writing projects on learners' writing skills and self-perceptions. The participants, six high-beginning adult English language learners in an intensive language program at an American university, completed three website-creation tasks over a period of 16 weeks. For each CMC task, students targeted a specific external audience and received feedback from that audience on the content, organization, and clarity of their work. To illustrate, one of the tasks involved researching the jobs of State Department English Language Officers and creating websites with information about their home cultures that would be useful to such people, to be reviewed by two State Department employees. Qualitative data were collected from participants' completed projects and semi-structured interviews and coded for references to participants' views on CMC technology, the impact of an authentic audience's feedback on writing quality, and student motivation.

Findings suggested that participants found the integration of CMC into their writing instruction "interesting and stimulating" and enjoyed being placed in expert roles through the creation of personally-relevant websites (Chen & Brown, 2012, p. 444). Responses to being able to access and receive feedback from real-world audiences—as opposed to from their instructor or other representatives of ESL academia—were also overwhelmingly positive. In interviews with Chen and Brown (2012), participants expressed an increased sense of ownership over their writing and feelings of "obligation" to more carefully select what information and language to

present to their intended audience (p. 446). According to Chen and Brown (2012), the ability to view classmates' work online further fostered a sense of community and motivated participants to try harder to perfect their own projects.

However, a few students voiced dissatisfaction with the extensive focus on CMC and website-building, saying that there was "not enough learning English" in the class (Chen & Brown, 2012, p. 444). While this criticism may simply be a matter of personal preference, it serves as a reminder that the use of CMC in language classrooms may not always align with the actual goals of students and could become a distraction if it is not integrated into traditional educational contexts judiciously and with a sense of moderation.

While Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005) and Chen and Brown (2012) provide valuable insight into how CMC technology may open up new opportunities for writer/reader and group interactions or shape the identities and social roles that L2 writers adopt in classroom settings, both studies could have benefitted from the use of control groups. Without a reference point situated in traditional writing instruction and practices, we cannot determine whether the reported interpersonal positionings, conceptions of self as author or expert, and feelings of increased agency and motivation are unique to these CMC contexts or could be reproduced across other mediums of written discourse. Furthermore, participants in both studies indicated that they felt their writing ability had improved as a result of engaging with and receiving feedback from more authentic audiences, yet the researchers provide no evidence that writing online has had any effect on the quality of these students' work. The inclusion of pre- and post-study writing samples, or a report regarding students' progress throughout the semester from the class's instructor, could have made a much more compelling case for the necessity of computer-based composition and socialization in traditional ESL/EFL classrooms.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CMC-BASED IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Several of the studies we have discussed (Black, 2006; Chen & Brown, 2012; Jwa, 2012; Lam, 2000; Spiliotopoulos & Carey, 2005) have suggested that participation in text-based CMC communities not only influences L2 writers' identities but may also help them develop their writing skills; however, this claim remains relatively unexplored in and unsupported by the literature. Certainly, any form of writing allows language learners to practice and arguably improve their literacy skills, a process that may become more effective when L2 writers have access to authentic, supportive audiences and can act with more agency regarding their personal interests and goals. Yet it continues to be unclear whether these conditions gain any specific potency or become more advantageous for L2 development by virtue of their placement in CMC contexts over traditional print-based writing and feedback conventions.

Warschauer (1997) and Kern (2006) argue that CMC's merging of social interaction with text-based media grants language learners "ample opportunity to focus on form and content," which could, in turn, create spontaneous learning or self-revision events (Kern, 2006, p. 195). This position is somewhat supported by the ways in which Nanako (Black, 2006), Julie (Jwa, 2012), and the participants in Chen and Brown's (2012) study responded to direct feedback on their texts. Black (2006) notes that Nanako received "pointed but gentle feedback" on how to improve her fanfiction through reader reviews but does not go on to discuss whether Nanako's writing significantly changed as a result (p. 181). In Jwa's (2012) case study, Julie similarly

received constructive criticism from her readers—an act she seemed to intentionally invite in her A/Ns—and visibly incorporated it into her work, demonstrating that author-audience interaction in fanfiction communities can influence not only the content of stories but the mechanics and language use of the writer. Jwa (2012) particularly highlights an instance in which Julie edited an entire chapter of one of her stories in order to revise tense-shifting mistakes that had been pointed out by a reviewer, an action that seems to support Warschauer (1997) and Kern's (2006) argument for increased focus on form opportunities in text-based CMC contexts. Finally, participants in Chen and Brown's (2012) study reported devoting special attention to the precision and complexity of the language they used on their websites because they perceived both their targeted audiences and the feedback they received from those audiences as more authentic and therefore more valuable (p. 450).

These few examples, while intriguing, do not constitute enough evidence on which to base any claims about the connection between exploring one's L2 identity through writing on the internet and the development of one's L2 writing ability. As noted previously, it is difficult to account for any potential improvements in writing accuracy, complexity, content, or organization without collecting pre- and post-study writing samples from participants in these types of qualitative studies. Jane, the focus of Chen's (2013) case study, captures both the challenge and importance of attempting to determine causal relationships between CMC writing practices and ability when she says, "I don't think Facebook language can enhance your academic writing ability, but I think Facebook contains lots of pragmatic English use… that is very important for English learning in general" (p.162). Still, Jenkins (2009) frames participatory culture as a particularly effective learning space, as participants are "constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills, and… [allowed] to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others" (p. 9). In light of the empirical studies reviewed here, these CMC spaces do appear to function as informal educational settings that encourage L2 writers to experiment with target language forms and position themselves as authorities. However, we simply need further research to truly understand the underlying processes and results of this social education as well as the role of CMC in expanding positionings of identity *and* writing ability among language learners.

CONCLUSION

English continues to reign as the language of the internet and of social media, a reality that may alternately motivate or discourage language learners from reaching out to audiences beyond their physical sociocultural and linguistic communities. Gee (2008) and Jenkins (2009) argue that access to the participatory culture of CMC "functions as a new form of… hidden curriculum, shaping which youth will succeed and which will be left behind as they enter school and the workplace" due to the centrality of CMC in our lives and the way in which it encourages the development of certain skills valued in our global society (Jenkins, 2009, p. 3). Text-based CMC communities offer a form of informal, experimental education to language learners who have access to them, as well as a means of exploring who they are as L2 writers and as people. Various aspects of their identities can be probed or performed by engaging with diverse online communities, a practice that may also lead to increased feelings of motivation and personal agency and the further development of their writing abilities.

Current research indicates that language learners already voluntarily engage in a variety of online writing practices outside of their ESL/EFL classrooms. They may participate in various social media platforms or fan communities in order to maintain real-world relationships with their peers, establish contact with international audiences who share their interests, or seek support for and feedback on personal writing projects. Within these spaces, L2 writers are free to adopt powerful new identities or social roles—author, affiliate, expert, editor—that may not always be accessible to them in their real-world social groups or classrooms. Furthermore, both social media and participatory culture appear to value L2 writers' positionings as English language learners or immigrants in a way that traditional academic settings may not, since, as Ivanič (1998) notes, many ESL/EFL students feel that the prescriptive "conventions [of academic communities] forced them to dismiss other aspects of their identity" (p. 234). While further research is required, the global accessibility provided by CMC may also support self- and peer-directed second language writing development in a way that could be particularly beneficial for EFL or distance learners, where opportunities to practice and develop language skills are often rare outside of the classroom.

The increasing prevalence and social importance of CMC and its potential to shape the personal and social identities of language learners mark it as an important area for continued study within the second language writing field. Haneda (2006) argues that ESL/EFL instructors should expand their conception of literacy to include such forms of voluntary and non-academic writing, as "students' investment in school learning appears to increase" when the boundaries between home and school life are deliberately softened (p. 343). Thus, recognition and validation of students' out-of-school identities may help bridge the gap between the selves L2 writers construct in their daily lives and those they may be pressured to adopt in educational contexts, contributing to the creation of more student-centered and empowering learning environments. Because the many facets of identity—linguistic, cultural, social—centrally inform how we write and how we relate to an audience, Ivanič and Camps (2001) suggest raising L2 writers' awareness of how their discoursal choices specifically influence projections of identity in their writing. Ultimately, we must continue to explore how best to integrate CMC into language classrooms and L2 writing instruction in order to "enable students to master a wide range of literacy practices with which they can shape their futures in a rewarding and responsible manner" (Haneda, 2006, p. 343).

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