Reimagining the Ever-Changing Construct of Saudi Writerly Identity: A Heuristic Approach

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Abstract
This paper takes on a heuristic approach (Crowley & Debra, 2004) to the study of Saudi writerly identity. In this critical review paper, the author argues that little work has been carried out to study Saudi English as a second langauge (ESL) writers' identity, for most of the empirical studies approach their writing as substandard writers. Therefore, this paper adds critical insights to the exciting literature about L2 Saudi writers and invite second language (L2) researchers to deconstruct the essentialized view towards peripheral writers. The paper also was guided by the question: how are ESL Saudi writers perceived in the Western educational system? Throughout the paper, the researcher problematizes that most studies about L2 Saudi writers are rife with references to phenomena in these student writings as negative transfers and linguistic errors. Other empirical studies were blinded from Saudi L2 discourse by the minutia of mechanism and look at students' writings as illegitimate. However, studies like Canagarajah's (2013) and Saba's (2013) can forward the conversation into a deeper understanding of these students' writing identities and how they perceive themselves as writers and knowledge constructors. The article briefly explores the current definition of identity and how it is related to second language writing, followed by an explanation of Ivanić's framework of writer identity. Then, the paper reviews previous research on how ESL Arab students negotiate and construct their written identities in Western educational settings. Finally, the author proposes directions for future empirical research and promising windows for studying the identity of Saudi ESL writers.
Keywords: Arabic writing style, heuristic approach, identity, contrastive rhetoric

Introduction

Not only have disciplines such as composition and L2 writing (e.g., Matsuda, 2001; Ivanić,1998) and linguistic anthropology (e.g., Hymes, 1971) been hothouses for identity research, but also a myriad of writers in the field of identity and second-language acquisition have invested extensively in the topic. Significant examples including Block (2007) and Norton (2013), and in 2015, *The Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, a preeminent applied linguistic journal, dedicated a whole volume to the review of topics related to identity and language learning. These efforts reflect that the current awareness, in applied linguistics and other related fields such as L2 writing, of the growing need to harbor healthy diverse classroom environments in developed/ing countries.

This study aims at unpacking the mainstream views toward peripheral L2 writers as deficit and urges L2 researchers to appreciate the linguistic diversity of L2 writers in their meaning-making processes in academic writing. Moreover, this study investigates critically previous empirical studies that were conducted on Saudi ESL writers and deconstructs the essentialist views towards L2 Saudi writers; furthermore, the author expands the conversation towards L2 writers and invite researchers to explore uncharted areas of L2 writing from a poststructuralist perspective such as writerly identities, writing and investment, and writing in an unequal power dynamic environments.

The social turn in education and humanities—that knowledge is socially constructed—shifts the research paradigm to situate the individual subjectivity within a broader social context, which makes identity study in writing a key term to understand the composing process (Trimbur, 1994). Indeed, identity and language learning are inseparable; they are two sides of the same coin, for cognition, as well as socio-cultural aspects, play a major role in foregrounding the linguistic choice/voice for any language user. Norton's research (2000, 2019) on identity reinforces that identity has been an important part of the social sciences too, for it assures plurality of language learning; any social contribution through the medium of language can convey the learners' background: language competency, beliefs, and a sense of belonging that deserves reverence. The weight of student identities lies also in that they can boost the educational milieu in the classroom: as Ritchie (1989) has argued, "the personal, educational, and linguistic histories students bring to our classes contribute to the rich texture of possibilities for writing, thinking, and for negotiating personal identity" (p.157).

In this paper, the researcher explores the notion of writer identity as expressed through different discourses and textual features. Then the paper moves on to argue that little work has been explored to study Saudi ESL writers' identity, for most of the empirical studies approach L2 Saudi writers writing style from a deficit perspective. For instance, such studies are rife with references to phenomena in these student writings as negative transfers and linguistic errors. Others are blinded from the discourse of these students (Saudi writers) by the minutia of mechanism and looked at student's writings as substandard. However, studies like Canagarajah's (2013) and Saba (2013) can forward the conversation into a deeper understanding of these students' writing identities and how they perceive themselves as writers and knowledge constructors/negotiators. In the following sections, I begin with a brief definition of identity and how it is related to second language writing, followed by a brief explanation of Ivanić's (1998) framework of writer identity and the difficulties it can present for students. Then, the article

presents previous research on how ESL Saudi students negotiate and construct their written identities in Western educational settings. Finally, the author proposes directions for future empirical and promising windows for studying the identity of Saudi ESL writers.

Literature Review
Defining Identity in SLA and L2 Writing
Many researchers in the field of composition and L2 writing have defined and treated identity in different ways; some researchers look at it in terms of voice (Elbow 1994; Matsuda & Tardy 2007; Matsuda & Jeffrey, 2012; Norton, 2019), persona, self-representation, and writer's ethos (Cherry,1988, Alharbi, 2019), and writers' visibility and stance (Hyland 1999, 2012). Traditionally, identity was defined as a static mental representation of one's self. However, more researchers are looking at it as an evolving construct. Williams (2006) proposed that identity "as opposed to an internal somewhat stable sense of 'self,' has been recognized as a construction, influenced by culture and ideology and changeable depending on the social context" (p.4). This take on identity as a construct goes along with Park's (2007) definition of identity as "an inherently social product that is jointly created by communicators, rather than as a pre-determined, psychological construct that is lodged within each individual's mind" (p. 341).

Moreover, scholars from various disciplines proffered other definitions of identity. To provide a more lucid understanding of identity as an evolving topic in ESL research, Norton (2000) reaffirmed that identity deals with "how people understand their relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p.12). From the psychosocial perspective, however, identity is an individual's self-concept deriving from their awareness of membership in a particular social group (Milville, Koonce, Darlington, & Whitlock, 2000).

Concerning the social definition of identity, Ivaničˇ (1998) elaborated on writers' identity and asserts that identity is constructed through struggles with the powerful ideological and discoursal dominations in society as members construct their identities as a result of social interaction with and affiliation to a certain community. For Ivanič, "Writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities for selfhood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs, and interests which they embody" (p. 32). Also, Hyland (2012) referred to writers' identity as a matter of what we are and do, and ultimately of how we, as writers, express such thoughts in written discourse and how these identities are a pre-established discourse of one's repertoire, academic discourse, social values, and personal experiences.

Furthermore, the writer's discourse and identity are intertwined; Gee (1989) provided a comprehensive perspective: identity and discourse are co-constitutive that aid educational research to provide a means for the expression of those written identities. Gee (1989) has described discourse as an "identity kit" (p. 7) or as "ways of being certain kinds of people" (Gee, 2000, p. 110). Informed by the above-mentioned perspectives, I define identity in L2 academic writing as (1) ESL writers' perceptions of their personal and social relationships with their new academic discourse community, (2) the factors and processes that construct these relationships within power dynamics, (3) dynamics adopted by these students to legitimize their members in L2 academic

writing in a Western environment, and (4) ways in which students position themselves or are positioned by in a new academic discourse community where linguistic and cultural diversity prevails.

Identity in Second Language Writing: A Brief Background
Ortega (2009) proposed that the study of identity and L2 learning is one of the most thought-provoking research areas in the field of applied linguistics, for its importance is worth consideration. Moreover, Schmitt (2010) asserted that identity, especially in applied linguistics, is an important social factor because of linguistic patterns signal not only social and individual identity but also people's awareness of their identities in language use.

In the U.S., the heterogeneous population of students throughout the twentieth century was manifested in the college classroom with the entrance of students from multi-geographical and racial levels including non-traditional students as well as first-generation (Young, 2014). In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication issued a policy statement in response to the linguistic diversity of the U.S composition classroom. This statement empowers L2 students and encourages teachers to understand the students' identities. The statement titled *Students' Right to their Language* and reads as follows: "We affirm the students' right to their patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style " (p. 2). After that, several compositionists started to explore the possibilities of different identities students might bring to the classroom. Scholars such as Smitherman (1977), Heath (1983), Shaughnessy (1977), and Bartholomae (1986) shed light on the language use from a social lens, which may help ease students into formal educational settings (Young, 2014).

Interestingly, researchers in second-language writing have been giving more attention to L2 writers to understand the nature of their written identities and appreciate the Englishes that international students bring to the class (see Matsuda. 2001). For instance, Cox, Jordan, and Ortmeier-Hooper (2010) have described that the field of L2 writing has tried "to reconcile the identities students bring with the identities their instructors expect them to occupy—or at least perform—as they develop into academic and professional writers" (p. xvii).

While the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) statement of *Students' Right to their Language* in 1974 covered native English varieties, Horner, Lu, Royster and Trimbur (2011) went beyond that and included nonnative users of English. They called for a new translingual approach in teaching writing to "develop alternatives to conventional treatments of language difference" (p.304). Horner et al.'s article "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach" reinforced that viewing language differences should help teachers to "honor and build on, rather than attempt to eradicate, those realities of difference" (p.313). A translingual pedagogy approach indeed allows teachers to discover the heterogeneous, fluid, and negotiable identities within a writer.

Ivaniˇc Framework to Study Writer's Identity
To understand how Saudi ESL writers position their identities to Western literacy practices and discourse convention, Ivaniˇc (1998) framework is helpful in this conversation; it is a comprehensive tool for studying the nuances of ESL Saudi written texts, understanding how their

cultural values are represented in the text, looking at how they negotiate and construct their identities with the socially available resources, and analyzing how Saudi practice writing literacy as a novel tool for possible identities. Indeed, this framework can foster our understanding of any type of writer's identity "of any age undertaking any type of writing in any cultural context" (p.159).

Ivaniˇc (1998) instrumental book provides a useful, overarching framework for understanding identity in writing of different levels. She postulates four aspects of writer identity: "autobiographical self," "discoursal self," "self as author," and "possibilities for self-hood" (p. 23). Clark and Ivaniˇc (1997) commented on these types of writer identity and assert that "there is little research to these aspects of writer identity, and we recommend further studies (…) in a language other than their first" (pp. 159-160).

The autobiographical self simply means the writer's sense of self: Ivaniˇc (1998) explained it as "a writer's sense of their roots, of where they are coming from" (p. 24). This type of identity, which is socially constructed, is drawn from Goffman's notion of a performer (in this case, the writer) who summons previous life experiences and social positions to perform a written identity in discourse. To put it in practice, a writer's autobiographical self in writing may include his/her L1 cultural and social literacy, the previous readings about the topic of L2 learning and identity, professional background, and previous academic trajectories including conferences and informal discussions in the classroom.

The discursive features used by the writers can also imply some aspects of his/her identity; that is, the *discoursal-self* can give an impression of identity through the varied usage of the lexicon in a certain genre and sometimes is termed as the writer's voice (Ivaniˇc, 1998; Matsuda, 2001). For instance, a writer can take on an academic voice in any given area by using certain discoursal features that are associated with the field they are studying. These features can include "nominalization, use of hedges and boosters, reporting verbs, APA style citations, self-mention, and so on" (Matsuda, 2105, p. 144). These features can also encompass a broader range of non-discursive features, such as "the choice of topic, the points of emphasis in the discussion, and the attention to historical details" (Matsuda, 2015, p.144). It should also be noted that this category is inseparable from the first one—the autobiographical self. These discoursal choices are influenced by one's autobiographical self, but they are also a conscious decision to reflect oneself in the eyes of the readers.

Perhaps, the most powerful category is *the self as the author*; a writer can perform and treat writing with a sense of being the author. The *writer as an author* is similar to what Foucault calls "author-function" (as cited in Matsuda, 2015, p. 125) since this type of identity is associated with gender, class, and the ethnicity of the writer. The writer's *self as author* projects him/her in the discourse as an authority in the field. Readers in the discipline can also construct the writer's *self as an author*. The continuum of the writer's authority varies among different authors and readers. In this sense, the writer may "create more room for negotiating discourse conventions, as readers are more willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the author if they believe that the author is an accomplished writer" (Matsuda, 2015, p.144).

All of the above-stated possibilities of writers' identities can be enabled or constrained by one's *possibilities of selfhood*—i.e., through the socially available identity options and discursive resources. Writing is not just a set of textual features, but it can also carry socially shared assumptions and practices that allow people to construct their identities or ways of being in society. Those resources may include various discoursal features and argumentative strategies from various genres, which either enable or constrain the writer's construction of a sense of identity appropriate for the situation.

Why Saudi Arabian ESL Writers

In recent years, the number of Saudi students joining American universities has dramatically increased. *Inside Higher Education* announced that the number of Saudi students in the United States has increased by 11%, and this bring Saudi students to nearly 70,000. The journal also reported that these populations represent the fourth largest group of international students by country of origin in U.S. universities, after students from China, India, and South Korea. In 2015, the Institute of International Education reported that the Saudi government is sending tens of thousands of Saudi students to the United States to develop a globally competent workforce. This exchange is part of a promising program that King Abdullah launched in 2005 and that is scheduled to continue through 2020.

An examination of these students' identities raises questions of othering, marginalization, and empowerment, which—in turn—might affect their literacy development, including writing. For example, Giroir (2014) explained critically in his narrative inquiry that post-9/11 discourses shaped how Saudi students saw themselves concerning the larger L2 community. They had expectations of being treated unequally and positioned based on their religious and ethnic identity.

When they arrive in the U.S., most often, ESL writers are being pushed to adapt to common Western writing practices and conventions, which can include objectivity, challenging the author, and deconstructing social myths. These practices, which can allow them to transform their perspective towards life, can pose some challenges since these literacy practices are not the types of literacy practices taught in their first language (L1) home education (Barnawi, 2011). Influenced by the teacher-dominant environment, their perception of writing can simply mean how to produce an error-free text. Another important factor is the absence of English composition as well as L1 composition practice in the high school curriculum, which even makes it more challenging for Saudi ESL writers to master L2 writing.

Additionally, Saudi students in the U.S are among the underrepresented groups in identity research (Song, 2016). Unfortunately, most of the previous studies that have been conducted on Saudi writing learners overlooked how these populations can see themselves as writers, and how the different practices that are not promoted back home can help crystalize their possible L2 identities. Instead, many of these studies analyze students' texts from a traditional lens of contrastive rhetoric that "tends to ignore the multiple factors that contribute to the process and product of L2 writing, such as L1 writing expertise, developmental aspects of L2 proficiency, and individual writers' agency reflected in their intentions and preferences" (Kubota & Lehner 2004, p.12). Indeed, most of the research, specifically in the ESL context, conducted on the nature of

Saudi L2 writing mainly 'other' their linguistic practices, label them as substandard writers of English and analyze their texts as a product, rather than vessels for ever-growing identities.

Writing in Saudi Arabia

To understand any phenomenon, it is significant to examine its ontogenesis, for we "need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.64). In this sense, situating the Saudi context of teaching English and writing, can be a cornerstone for identity analysis. Hence, in Saudi Arabia, educators do not give much attention to composition class. For example, in high school, only one hour a week is allocated for writing, and no other writing assignments are required to pass any other classes. Therefore, the writing-intensive curricula in the U.S. might be quite a shock for many of these students.

Besides, the perception of English writing in the Saudi context is focused on the prescriptive level: heavily focused on vocabulary and grammar rules. Students in English classes are encouraged to parrot vocabulary and mimic grammar rules to supposedly be effective users of English (Al-Semari, 1993; Aljamhoor, 1996). For instance, Liebman-Kleine (1986) investigated forty-six essays by Arabic-speakers to better understand their writing style and ability. She concluded that Arabs were taught a great deal of grammar but few process techniques, such as planning, organization, and support. This can create a challenge when they study abroad.

Critical enough, Saudi students are influenced by the rhetorical styles of the Arabic language, their mother tongue. The Arabic rhetorical style is strongly influenced by a poetic oral tradition (Abu Rass, 2011). Historically, oral poetry in the Arabian Peninsula has played a major role in Arab culture, and its effectiveness is still alive today: the rhetorical style in Arabic writing tends to be repetitive, narrative-oriented, and flowery, for oral poetry was the primary means of telling stories in the tribal nomadic societies of the Middle East.

In the same vein, the nature of communal relationships typically impacts Saudi students' writing style. In societies with often collective values (e.g., Saudi society), communication tends to be more emotionally interdependent and less direct (Fox, 1994), whereas in individual societies (e.g., American society) written communication tend to be more direct and emotionally independent (Triandis, Bontempo, & Villareal, 1988). These norms of communication influence the writers' voice, identity, and rhetorical style. According to Al-Zahrani and Kaplowitz (1993), "Western cultures assign priority to the goals and identity of the individual, whereas non-Western cultures place a higher value on loyalty to the ... ethnic ... group" (p. 224). Since Arab ESL students generally belong to collectivist cultures, the value of collective voice might seem obvious in their writing styles as the desire to maintain social harmony influences how students write, learn, and think (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999).

As a result of these students' tendency to hold on to the tradition of the group, some scholars such as Cummings (1995) suggested that writing teachers might look at Arab student writers as knowledge tellers, who report information, but not as knowledge transformers, who synthesize information into personal and critically meaningful concepts. This is because they

"perceive writing in the traditional style where it abides by rules, and a certain structure" (Shukri, 2014, p.191).

However, some scholars look askance at such comparisons between the rhetorical style of Saudi students and the Western convention. In his seminal, yet criticized, work, Kaplan (1966) claimed that Arabic, as a Semitic language, "is based on a complex series of parallel constructions, both positive and negative" (p. 6) as opposed to English linear style. Although Kaplan's work was only on structural elements of the text, some writing scholars such as Matsuda (1997) called for a more multidimensional view of rhetoric, among which are the "textual features [that reflect] the personal background of the ESL writer" (p. 51). Similarly, Kubota and Lehner (2004) challenged essentialism: they problematize the differences of rhetoric in writing, for such established differences have "perpetuated static binaries between English and other languages" and promoted viewing students "as culturally lacking." (p. 7). They further pointed out that cultural differences in writing should be critical and should "reject ahistorical, fixed, and simplistic definitions of cultural rhetoric, calling attention to multiple factors that may affect the structures and interpretations of L2 texts or texts in various languages" (p.12). In the next section, I review previous studies to showcase how researchers have investigated L2 Saudi writers from a deficit model and essentialized L2 Saudi writing as a substandard discourse.

A Heuristic Analysis of the Current Literature
Saudi L2 Writers: A Substandard Lens
The following studies (the one stated below) have focused on how ESL Saudi students are not legitimate ESL writers and are the illogical other. This assumption legitimizes unequal power relations and reinforces cultural essentialism that draws a binary distinction between the logical superior self and the other (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). Hence, this paper argues that most of the studies treated Saudi/Arab students' writing as a product (i.e., using a textual interpretation approach); they do not explore the process to identify the growth of the writers' unique identity. As argued above, writing, especially in the Western way, is an almost novel literacy practice for Saudi students; therefore, the researchers in the coming sections were blinded by the extent of how the students should adopt the western convention. They thus overlooked how these writers were able (or unable) to construct and negotiate their meaning in the new writing environment and how they utilized the new tool of writing practice to develop their possible selves.

Thompson-Panos' and Thomas-Ružić's (1983) article depicted Arab writers as non-compatible users of English as they transfer their L1 rhetorical moves into English. The purpose of their study was to understand the background of Arab students, which can help in understanding their struggles and providing the appropriate materials for teaching them. The results of the study show that the Arabic stylistic tradition of over-exaggeration and the use of superlatives is transferred into English text, which students should learn to abandon. They justify this stance by referring to Shouby (1951) that,

> Arabs stand a good chance of being misunderstood, in Arabic, unless they over assert and exaggerate… if Arabs say exactly what they mean without the expected exaggeration, other Arabs may not only miss the point but may interpret the message to mean just the opposite (as cited in Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić, 1983, p. 619).

These repetitions in Arabic style "can be ineffective or at least distracting when transferred to English, especially in written discourse" (Thompson Panos & Thomas-Ružić, 1983, pp. 545-546). In another study that virtually echoes the previous one, Fakhri (1994) analyzed a collection of 60 English essays, 30 of which are written by native Arabic speakers. He finds that Arabic writers employ a cyclical rhetorical style, overuse coordinating words such as "and", and lack meta-linguistic skills. These rhetorical features, as Fakhri suggests, are not acceptable rhetorical features in the Western convention.

Aiming to understand Saudi ESL writers' rhetorical style, Wege (2013) conducted a qualitative study to demonstrate "how features of Arabic rhetoric are reflected in essays written by native Arabic-speaking from Saudi Arabia at the college level" (p.10). The spurring moment of her research begins when she notices, as a writing teacher, that these writers manifest unique written styles relevant to their L1 cultural and social linguistic values. Wege (2013) focused on four rhetorical elements of Saudi students' persuasive essays. These elements are the main idea, development in the body paragraphs, parallelism, and word repetition. In her findings, the students repeated the keyword "happiness" and "happy" for about 32 times, and other words such as "inside" were repeated for about 13 times to emphasize the importance of the message. The students also developed their writing styles by utilizing a combination of features of the Western as well as Arabic rhetoric.

In their initial paragraphs, the Saudi writers tended to be direct and inform their readers of what they are going to write about. On the other hand, they rephrased the premise in the paragraph three times: at the beginning, body, and the end of the paragraph, which reflects a unique rhetorical style that is extensively influenced by their mother tongue. Wege concluded that the influence of the L1 Arabic rhetoric is visible, and the students' writing style can be summarized in the following points: "indirect, uses lengthy description, metaphors, and verses from the Qur'an in its development; utilizes parallelism to create a balance to the message; and employs word repetition to emphasize the importance of a message" (p.65). Although these discourses were meaningful to Wage, she does not acknowledge how these students draw from their linguistics resources to construct their unique *discoursal-self*; instead, she urges teachers to apply implicit instruction to help them write according to the Western convention.

In another mixed-method study, Barry (2014) focused again more on the structural, grammatical features of these writers. She investigates five ESL Saudi students in basic and freshman writing courses. She looks at Saudi students' writing in terms of linguistic errors. She analyzes several writing samples from the Saudi ESL writers based on several factors, including: "use of conjunctions, use of the conventions of English expression, use of articles, word order, spelling issues, punctuation, and the cultural tendency for Arabic writers to employ over-exaggeration in their writing" (pp. 5-6). Results of the study resonate well with other literature: "errors in the use of punctuation, conjunctions, capitalization." These types of micro syntactical elements seem to be the alluring space for writing teachers to focus on and overlooked how these writers develop their sense of writing ability through time. Barry seems to support the standardization movement and looks at non-native writers as deficit writers, who cannot express themselves as legitimate writers of English. She confirms that "L1 Arabic ESL learners need

instruction that focuses specifically on the Standard English conventions associated with punctuation, conjunctions, capitalization, and articles" (p.47). She overlooked how were they able to express themselves differently. Although she asserts that students must maintain their culture in writing, she seems to contradict herself by promoting the standardization of Western writing conventions.

In sum, research on the composing process of Saudi ESL writers has focused primarily on students' writing from a structural lens and underestimated the role of the students' different and evolving selves. These studies also do not investigate the ecology of these students' writers: how students practice writing in their mother tongue/ L1, the identities associated with that, and how they transpire in L2 writing. While the perfect re-reproduction of the language is the primal goal in such studies, the humans—i.e., the unique individual selves of each student—are underrated in the process.

Beyond Structuralism: A Point of Departure

Undoubtedly, one's writing is a portal to a treasury of one's most complicated thoughts. Writing is an utterly invaluable tool, and it is essential for the understanding of human individual thoughts as well as social phenomena. The ultimate goal of researching identity in written discourse is to find with reverence the souls and worlds behind the words, and to empower writing students to unabashedly bring their voice into L2 discourse in ways that are meaningful to them. Claiming that the writer has only one voice or identity is contradictory to the nature of identity, which is dynamic in different rhetorical situations and genres. Instead, researchers should look, as Hirvela and Belcher (2001) suggested, for the "the plural rather than singular nature of voice" (p.45). From this stance, researchers should sort through L1 as well as L2 discourses and acknowledge their interactions and how they transfer or affect L2 writers' voices.

That being said, in a qualitative study, Saba (2013), a female Saudi ESL writing teacher at Virginia Tech, sought to understand the obstacles faced by Saudi ESL writing students throughout their process of writing, especially when the writing course is integrated with critical thinking and reflection. The number of Saudi participants in this case study was ten—six female and four male Saudi Arabian ESL students. The researcher uses a variety of tools to capture their written identities: classroom observation, interviews with ESL students and teachers, and student writing samples. In this study, Saba (2013) looked at identity as a form of a written voice in general; she does not break voice down to look at the role of autobiographical self, discoursal and authorial selves in the students' process of making these choices. Saba found out that,

> the female students were able to progress and assert their voices, moving from silence to perceived knowledge." On the other hand, the male students, while starting with a stronger voice when orally participating in class, were less able to demonstrate their critical thinking in writing (p.3).

Saba emphasizes that "their cultural and literacy practices, however, influence the type of topics and how they chose to express their critical thinking [orally], which differ from what is expected in US universities" (p.3).

In another case, Canagarajah's (2013) ethnographic study on ESL Saudi Arabian students studying in the US is another pertinent contribution. The main purpose of Canagarajah's article was to suggest translingual pedagogies inspired by students' creative strategies; he does not focus as much on the role of identity in these creative productions, yet he still does not deem them erroneous as long as they serve the rhetorical purpose, which many previous studies do not take into account.

The two participants are Buthainah and Fawzia. Buthaina treats writing as a metonymic of difference as the case: she starts her essay with "an epigraph," composed of an Arabic proverb which is translated into: "Who fears climbing the mountains—Lives forever between the holes" (Canagarajah, 2013, p.51). Canagarajah observed other peculiar linguistic features of Buthainah's essay and finds some creative, non-native language use. For instance, she used "storms of thoughts stampede" and "my literacy development shunts me" although "stampede" and "shunt" do not collocate with the rest of the words. Buthainah also employs a variety of rhetorical strategies to manifest her identity as a second language writer through non-discursive features, such as the type of the font and the section divider. She uses Islamic emoticons in her essay to express herself when words cannot. She also further explains that these drawings reflect her previous literacy practices and heritage.

The other Saudi participants, Fawzia, emphasized how proud one should be of her/his identities, she stated:

> ESL students should never isolate their writing in English from their cultural beliefs… [they] should [not] use English cultural background to develop their ideas, they should stick to their identities and be proud to express themselves freely (p.52).

Though it seems that she is very committed to her identity, it is obvious, as Canagarajah (2013) contended, in her written discourse that she constructs a hybrid identity that merges her "culture resources with English" (p.52).

Although the main purpose of Canagarajah's article was to understand the creative strategies that international students employ in their writing class and how these strategies can inform ESL writing teacher—dialogical pedagogy—he does not focus as much as on the role of identity in these creative productions beyond aligning oneself with the Western convention or finding a hybrid in between. Empirical research is needed to explore the intricacies within identity itself: the role of autobiographical self, discoursal, and authorial selves in the student's' process of making these creative choices.

Considering the critical aspects of students' writers—other than looking at these writers as deficit ones—in the aforementioned studies, it is indispensable to expand our research on Saudi ESL identity: In fact, identity and writers function epistemologically to create and express knowledge that is not necessarily located in or limited by local practices, but ones can rather forward our understanding about how our student write and why they write through an awareness of who they are. Examining these students' lived experiences (*auto-biographical-self*), discoursal features and voice (*discoursal-self)*, and their power (*authorial-self*) should direct researchers as

well writing teachers in the field of L2 writing "to engage with issues surrounding language differences more critically" (Matsuda,2014, p.483). In their analysis of Saudi L2 writing, English composition professionals and L2 writing specialists should move beyond surface issues, "errorization," generality in understanding voice, or dualism in comprehending identity (looking at identity merely in terms of meshing Eastern/Western styles as in Canagarajah's article, without considering Ivanič's four layers of identity).

Disucssion and Further Directions

Poststructuralism and heuristic approach, the systematic analysis of texts in the teaching of a foreign/second language, has been increasingly embraced by researchers in the field of foreign language teaching. Treating language differences as a distinct process enacted by L2 writers, researchers can explore nuanced meanings and identities that have been overlooked by the dominant White standardized discourse. Interestingly, Canagarajah (2002) encouraged educators to go beyond the level of one-size-fits-all pedagogy, and urged them to interpret the composing of their students not from the perspectives of English writers, but the ESL students' perspectives:

> Students cannot be expected to leave behind their identities and interests as they engage in the learning process. What I call the negotiation model requires that students wrestle with the divergent discourses they face in writing to creatively work out alternate discourses and illiteracies that represent better their values and interest. In some cases, this means appropriating the academic discourse and conventions in terms of the students' backgrounds. It can sometimes mean a creative merging of conflicting discourses (p. 219).

Kubota & and Lehner's article (2004) unpacked the situated scholarly discourse on L2 writing and deconstructs the taken-for-granted differences between cultures in writing that reinforce linguistic racism. Some of the previous studies (e.g., Thompson-Panos' & Thomas-Ružić's, 1983; Fakhri, 1994; Wage 2013; Barry, 2014) have negatively created a deterministic view of L2 writing as they "inevitably transfer rhetorical patterns of their L1 in L2 writing" (p.9). Simultaneously, they have also perpetuated the ideology of superiority toward English rhetoric in their final thoughts/comments to conform to the standardized English style. These stigmatizations of students' writings are similar to the "colonial dichotomies between the colonizer and the colonized" (Pennycook, 1998, as cited in Kubota & Lehnerb, 2004). Such rhetoric of differences might inevitably perpetuate the 'Othering' of student's L2 writing. Instated, taking on a critical approach can help researchers in L2 writing as well as students to see how L2 writing students subjectivities are formed and transformed across time and space through their writing practices.

L2 writers should be perceived as unique writers culturally and linguistically—as long as they achieve the rhetorical purposes of their writings (Canagarajah, 2013). They can be a living example of how language evolves, and they can also introduce new beautiful expressions into the language: intercultural rhetoric can bring many strengths to our writing classrooms that mainstream writers may not (Connor, 2004). Scholars, including L2 writing researchers, need to reconstruct a healthy, more egalitarian stance for writers other than mainstream ones and familiarize themselves with other versions of Englishes that may take place in today's diverse classrooms (see Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010).

Instead of investigating how these L2 writers can write in standardized English, future research should address the following questions in American-oriented classroom communities: How do these students perceive writing in their L1? How can L2 writing help them mold new possible selves? Why do L2 writers write the ways they do? How do they grapple with the problems and challenges they face when writing in new environments? How do they develop voices as writers of Englishes? How do they negotiate their power and access as they develop their linguistic as well as cultural capital?

Since identity can be effective as an analytic tool for understanding writers' development, the Ivanic framework can aid researchers in these inquiries. It can provide us with promising insights into how L2 writing ESL students think, what they know, what they do, how they learn to write, and how they—thus—develop their possible discoursal, auto-biographical, and authorial selves. It also makes us more aware enough to avoid attributing any writing style that is "foreign" to the mainstream teachers to merely cultural differences of the other.

In relation to the above discussion, Valdés (1992) wondered "how traditions governing appropriate expression of feelings or beliefs have an impact on students when they write?" (p.125). While it is easy to attribute writing differences to cultural norms as Valdés advocated here, a step forward in studying the nuances of these discourses is to rather consider the individual: how these writings are affected by the writers' stance and identity evolution. Indeed, aspects pertinent to writers' identity--such as social class--are crucial variables that affect how students perceive writing as a tool to develop their literacy.

Valdés also suggested other windows of exploration that are worthwhile here: how ESL writers—Saudi ones for this paper—position themselves in relation to the classroom authority, such as their teachers? Valdés asked "Do students limit how they argue, what they recount, what they explain because the teacher is the sole audience? Do they consider certain kinds of writing to be inappropriate for addressing an instructor"? (p.135). How a student position in relationship to power is an essential aspect of figuring out membership and thus shaping one's writing.

The researcher position might also affect how L2 writing students are researched. For example, etic researchers (those who lack the knowledge of these student's subtle cultural practices) might be easily lured to construct the binary of us vs. the other. Future research on L2 writing must take into account the social and psychological intricacies of L2 students as an important variable that affect students' writing and stance. Thus, to push the field forward, we should ensure that researcher have enough emic knowledge that helps them stay "[cautious] in attributing [phenomena] to cultural background" (Valdés, 1992, p.135) where they might be a result of other factors that might play a vital role in student's writing.

While some of the above-cited research point out clearly that Arab students are influenced by their poetic and Islamic tradition, they do not look at the relationship between L1 speech and L2 writing. Researchers need to look at how students can argue orally in their L1 and how that is reflected in their L2 writing. L1 speech, which is generally more emphasized in Arabic, can subsume a repertoire of identities that Saudi L2 writers might carry out in L2 writing. This identity

translation might shift the way we view some phenomena in their writing from sheer flaws to reverence-worthy identity reincarnations (Alharbi, 2019).

Along with these directions, the poststructuralist construct of investment (Bourdieu,1986; Norton, 2013) can help researchers also to depict how L2 writing students acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (language, education, friendship), which eventually increases the value of their cultural capital and social power. The construct of investment provides insightful questions for understanding the writer's' identity from a broader scope: to what extent is the learner motivated to write in the target language? Are L2 writing students invested in the language practices of their classroom or community? To what extent investment can affect writer identity? A writer may be highly motivated but may nevertheless have little access to L2 discourses. Moreover, the prompts that are given to students may not be appropriate in their culture or religion (e.g., taboo topics) or some students have a little schematic background about the topic; thus, students are unfairly labeled as substandard writers. Such questions can also be eye-openers for future research on L2 students' writings.

Indeed, with a thorough dissection of previous studies, we can delineate future itineraries of ESL writing research: future studies should move from a traditional epistemology of differences to challenges deficit, assimilationist, and essentialist orientations in looking at L2 discourses. In this pursuit, critical inquiry into student minorities' texts give educators more insight about linguistic diversity and empower L2 writers to develop their writing identities "as [they] resist assimilation and appropriate the rhetoric of power to enable oppositional voices" (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p.15). Enthusiasts in the field look forward to future development in L2 writing practices that deconstruct the taken-for-granted compartment of L2 and L1 discourse and should investigate how L2 writing practices can answer the demands of the increasingly complex power relationships in our world today. Matsuda (2015) heralded an upcoming point of departure: "The development of [identity], then, may also involve … an awareness of how the self is situated in complex relations of power" (p. 154).

All in all, L2 writing in general and Saudi ESL writing in specific must entail a deeper analysis of how L2 writing students develop their selves as writers in the process of gaining L2 literacy. Research on the writing of the identities of diverse students can bring up a healthy conversation about the rhetoric of difference and its controversial repercussions in today's globalized world.

Conclusion

ESL students' written discourses carry valuable meanings that are worth investigating to better inform L2 writing teachers and the scholarship in general. When pursuing a degree in the U.S., Saudi students—whether graduate, undergraduate, or ESL—bring their cultural, ideological, social, and educational practices into the classroom, which might seem odd to some non-Arabic professors. The purpose of this critical paper was to delineate how L2 Saudi writers were perceived as deficit leaners in the literature; therefore, this paper adds critical insights to the exciting literature about L2 Saudi writers and invite L2 researchers to deconstruct the essentialized view towards peripheral writers. Throughout the paper, the researcher problematized that most studies about L2 Saudi writers were rife with references to phenomena in these student writings as negative transfers

and linguistic errors. Thus, future studies should consider L2 writing from not only a mere structural perspective but also, they should consider the wider macro effect of student-writers and investigate contesting issues such as writer's identities and the unique process in writing for nonmainstream L2 writers.

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