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A Narrative Inquiry of Writer Identity and the Self in Second Language Academic Writing in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigates how Pakistani MA TESOL students perceive and construct their identities as academic writers in English. Drawing on Ivanič's (1998) model of writer identity and adopting a narrative inquiry framework, the research focuses on five students' self-descriptions as they recall their educational and writing experiences, beginning from school and extending into their current postgraduate studies. Their accounts reflect how

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prior schooling, language background, and classroom experiences influence the autobiographical-self, shaping how they view their abilities and roles as writers. The data further reveal how students engage with academic discourse practices, adopting or challenging conventions to shape a discoursal-self that aligns with expectations while retaining aspects of their personal voice in writing. As their writing skills develop, the participants describe gradual shifts toward a stronger authorial-self, an identity marked by increased confidence, agency, and a sense of ownership. The study shows that second-language academic writing involves ongoing self-positioning and calls for teaching approaches that value students' linguistic backgrounds and personal learning histories, offering support that encourages confidence and identity development.

Keywords: Writer Identity and the Self, Second Language Writing, Narrative Inquiry, Pakistani TESOL Students, Discoursal-Self

1. Introduction

In recent years, applied linguists have become more interested in the process of how second language (L2) writers build their scholarly identities. It's not just vocabulary or grammar; writing in a second language means that students have to contend with more basic questions about who they are as writers (Harklau, 2000; Hyland, 2012; Canagarajah, 2015). All of these personal experiences, beliefs, and sense of self come into play as they approach writing tasks and gain confidence within an academic environment that can be unfamiliar (Norton, 2000). This is why notions of voice, legitimacy, and authority have gained so much traction in explaining the dilemmas L2 writers experience (Hyland, 2002; Zhao, 2015). Today, scholarly writing is viewed less as a technical proficiency and more as a social act in which identity continues to be shaped.

Though these discussions have picked up steam globally, they have not received as much notice in Pakistan. Although English is one of the official languages and widely spoken at universities, students often find writing in English stressful and daunting. The traditional teaching practices emphasising rote memorisation and rigidly structured grammar leaving little space for learners to establish a sense of voice or authorship. In advanced programmes such as in the Master of Teaching English as a Second Language (MA TESOL), by the time the students begin their studies, they may already feel completely overwhelmed with the demands and conventions of

global academic writing. The issue is compounded by descriptions such as 'non-native English speaker', which may cause students to feel marginalised in learning environments (Shuck, 2010). Writing in English for them is not merely a matter of learning the language. Instead, it is a matter of creating a space where students feel that their ideas belong, and their contributions are valued.

This study investigates writer identity construction among Pakistani MA TESOL students, addressing a context and population that have been underrepresented in the literature. In particular, we focus on how these students perceive and negotiate their identities as writers of academic English, and how their life histories and educational trajectories shape this process. We draw on Ivanič's (1998) multidimensional framework of writer identity, which delineates the *autobiographical-self* (the writer's sense of self shaped by past experiences), the *discoursal-self* (the identity projected in the text through discourse choices), and the *authorial-self* (the writer's sense of authority and ownership of their text). This framework provides a lens to analyse the complex interplay between individuals' backgrounds, their textual practices, and their stance as authors. We also employ narrative inquiry as our methodological approach, enabling us to explore participants' lived experiences and the stories they tell about themselves as writers. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Pakistani MA TESOL students' autobiographical-selves, shaped by their prior schooling, language background, and educational experiences, influence their perceptions of themselves as academic writers?
2. In what ways do these students construct their discoursal-selves through linguistic and discursive choices in their academic writing, and how do they negotiate adherence to or resistance against academic conventions?
3. How do Pakistani MA TESOL students develop their authorial-selves over time, particularly regarding confidence, agency, and ownership in their writing?

By combining Ivanič's theoretical model with narrative inquiry, this study offers a detailed understanding of how Pakistani L2 writers navigate identity in academic writing. It addresses calls for more research on the 'autobiographical-self' and personal dimensions of writer identity in non-Western, foreign-language contexts. The insights from this research will contribute to the broader discourse on multilingual academic writing and inform TESOL pedagogy, suggesting ways to

support graduate students in developing a confident and authentic writerly voice in English. In the following sections, we review relevant literature, outline our methodological approach, present the narrative findings from five case studies, and discuss the implications of these findings for theory and practice in L2 writing education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Writer Identity in L2 Academic Writing

Early views often framed writing as a neutral skill. However, perspectives influenced by poststructuralist thought have since redefined writing as a socially embedded practice where identity is multiple, fluid, and negotiated within discourse (Ivanič, 1998; Norton, 2000). For L2 writers, this means each act of writing is also a negotiation of who they are, how they wish to be perceived, and what position they occupy within an academic community.

This negotiation is rarely smooth. Casanave (2002) and Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) have shown that L2 writers frequently wrestle with tensions between their authentic voice and the academic voice they assume they are expected to adopt. Li's (2007, p. 259) study of bilingual memoirs introduced the metaphor of "souls in exile," capturing the alienation L2 writers often feel, followed by a potential transformation into "global souls" once they begin integrating their multiple identities. Still, not all writers follow this trajectory. Yang and Peng (2021) point out that many students write from within their own national and cultural contexts, not abroad, which makes the identity shift subtler but no less significant.

Context is critical. In English-dominant academic settings, L2 writers are often positioned in relation to native speaker norms and institutional labels such as ESL or EFL. These labels, as Shuck (2010) argues, can frame students as lacking rather than as competent contributors. Nonetheless, more recent research promotes a shift in thinking. Canagarajah (2020), for instance, advocates a translingual perspective where multilingual writers draw on their full linguistic and cultural repertoire, thereby resisting pressures to suppress their L1 identities. This view embraces hybridity and sees writing as a site of continual identity negotiation.

Empirical findings add nuance. The ethnographic research by Harklau (2000) showed that L2 students can be viewed very differently depending on the classroom context, and these perceptions in turn shape how they see themselves. Hyland (2012) found wide variation in how L2 students expressed stance and voice, often depending on their grasp of disciplinary

expectations. Zhao's (2019) large-scale study further challenged assumptions linking cultural background to authorial voice, concluding that factors like age, gender, or ethnicity had minimal influence on how voice was expressed. This evidence suggests that writer identity is more directly shaped by individual experiences and educational environments than by cultural background alone.

2.2 Ivanič's (1998) Framework: Autobiographical, Discoursal, and Authorial-self

In order to comprehend how identity appears in writing, this research employs Ivanič's (1998) framework, which describes three interdependent aspects of the writer identity. These include the autobiographical-self, the discoursal-self, and the authorial-self. These each form a distinct but interdependent level of how writers present themselves.

Autobiographical-self is the individual behind the writing, e.g., background, values, and experiences. It includes personal histories with education and language, influencing attitudes toward self-expression and writing. A student discouraged from speaking in school may bring those anxieties into college writing, while one who was complimented on creativity will be more confident with writing (Ivanič, 1998; Norton, 2000).

The discoursal-self is what appears within the actual text, created by the language choices of tone, stance, and style. This form of identity shows how authors see their audience and the professional norms of the academy to which they belong (Ivanič, 1998). The use of pronouns, formality or lack thereof, and conversation with other researchers through citation all add up to this textual presence. For L2 writers, managing these conventions can be particularly difficult, frequently resulting in such questions as What type of voice is permissible here? (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Canagarajah, 2015). The self of the author encompasses the writer's skill to claim ownership of ideas and to enact authority. This aspect is manifested in the extent to which a writer advances claims confidently, balances sources, and takes a position (Hyland, 2002; Hyland, 2012). Most L2 students hold back here, using instead the strategy of reporting others' work instead of presenting their own argument. The construction of a confident authorial-self, therefore, is bound up with a writer's confidence and the legitimacy of their voice.

A vulnerable autobiographical-self can lead to a tentative discoursal-self, which may hindering the development of an assertive authorial voice. These three dimensions, the autobiographical-self, the discoursal-self, and the authorial-self, are not separate entities; rather,

they are interconnected and mutually influence one another. These identities are continually shaped by the contextual 'possibilities for self-hood', that is, the extent to which institutional or educational environments support or constrain expression of identity. Each dimension impacts the others, creating a dynamic relationship in the construction of writer identity.

2.3 Narrative Inquiry and Identity in Academic Writing

To explore writer identity, an increasing number of studies have turned to narrative inquiry, a methodology that involves collecting and analysing stories (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Pavlenko, 2007). Narrative research is based on the assumption that individuals make sense of their lives in the form of narrative; as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) so eloquently put it, "if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively" (p. 17). Narratives about language learning and use provide valuable insights into identity by revealing how individuals interpret their experiences and perceive themselves in relation to those experiences.

In the context of L2 writing, narrative approaches have illuminated the subjective experience of writing in another language. For example, in an autobiographical narrative study, Moodie (2015) examined how EFL students writing personal stories in English began to integrate their life experiences into their English writing, thereby bridging the gap between their L1 self and L2 expression. Similarly, in an edited volume by Cox et al. (2010), several case studies presented narratives of student writers navigating new identities in U.S. universities, highlighting issues like anxiety, empowerment, and the impact of teacher feedback on self-concept. These narrative accounts highlight those factors such as voice appropriation, audience awareness, and prior literacy experiences play out in deeply personal ways for each writer.

A narrative perspective aligns well with Ivanič's framework. The *autobiographical-self* in particular is most directly accessed through stories – by having participants narrate their educational journeys and writing experiences, we gain insight into how their past has shaped their present identity. It also helps uncover what Yang and Peng (2021, p. 1) refer to as the "felt sense of self" of L2 writers, which might not be evident from analysing their texts alone. Narrative inquiry, therefore, complements textual analysis by focusing on writers' own voices about their writing. By listening to students' first-person accounts, researchers and educators can better understand the emotional and identity-laden dimensions of learning to write (Hanauer, 2012).

This study is situated at the intersection of these scholarly conversations: it adopts Ivanič's tripartite concept of writer identity and employs narrative inquiry to delve into how that identity is constructed among Pakistani MA TESOL students. The literature suggests that we should expect a complex interaction of personal history, cultural context, and educational practice in shaping how these students see themselves as writers. It also suggests that empowering L2 writers' identities (for example, by validating their multilingual background or encouraging personal voice) can have positive effects on their writing development. Through the participants' narratives, we seek to enrich the global understanding of L2 writer identity and inform pedagogies that can help students become more confident and authentic writers in English.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically narrative inquiry, which is well-aligned with the goal of understanding writer identity as it is lived and experienced. Narrative inquiry offers a powerful lens for examining how individuals make sense of their lives through the stories they tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this research, participants' narratives provide insight into how they perceive and construct their identity as academic writers in a second language.

Our methodological stance is rooted in a constructivist paradigm. We understand that individuals interpret their experiences in socially constructed ways, and that identity itself is shaped through interaction within one's environment and discourse communities. We are thus not only interested in what participants have done, but in how they interpret their writing journeys, how they see themselves evolving as writers, and what meanings they assign to moments of struggle or achievement. Narrative inquiry supports this approach by valuing temporality, personal-social contexts, and place which are all central to understanding identity over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

3.2 Participants and Context

This study included five MA TESOL students from a public university in Pakistan, selected for their active engagement with thesis writing and willingness to reflect on their academic experiences. Pseudonyms are used for all participant names.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Educational Backgrounds

Participant	Age	Academic Background	Language of Prior Education
Aamna Ashraf	26	BS in English Literature	English-medium till Grade 8, then Urdu-medium
Nimra Rasheed	25	BS in English Literature	English-medium (Private schools)
Buland Iqbal	27	B.Sc. in Computer Science	Mix of Urdu- and English-medium
Shagufta	40	BA in English Language Teaching	Primarily English-medium
Sidra	28	BA in English and Education	Urdu-medium with formal English instruction

All five Participants had 14–18 years of English education and were multilingual, fluent in Urdu and English. Their diverse schooling and academic paths provided varied perspectives on identity construction in L2 academic writing.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews with each participant. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was conducted in English, with participants encouraged to switch to Urdu when needed to express subtle meanings. The sections spoken in Urdu were carefully translated into English, with participants sometimes consulted to confirm that their intended meanings were accurately captured.

The interview protocol focused on eliciting writing autobiographies. Participants were asked to recount their early encounters with writing, key moments in their development, memorable feedback from instructors, and their thoughts and emotions during thesis writing. Prompts, such as *How do you see yourself as a writer now?* or *Has your writing identity changed during the MA*? encouraged reflective responses. This structure allowed participants to chart their growth, identify turning points, and articulate their evolving sense of self in relation to academic writing.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis followed a narrative methodology, involving both story construction and thematic coding. First, each interview transcript was read holistically, and narrative profiles were written for each participant. These profiles summarised their writing journey, with particular attention to key events and shifts in identity. Quotes from the participants were embedded in these narratives to maintain authenticity and reflect their voice.

Next, the data were thematically coded using Ivanič's (1998) identity framework: the autobiographical-self (past writing experiences and personal beliefs), discoursal-self (textual voice and language choices), and authorial-self (assertiveness, stance, and ownership of ideas). These codes were used to trace how participants talked about their writing and how they projected themselves as authors. New themes also emerged, including participants' roles as future teachers, and emotional responses to writing (e.g., anxiety, pride).

Interpretation was conducted dialogically considering how stories reflected identity shifts and where contradictions or growth could be seen. We also compared stories across cases, identifying both shared experiences (e.g., institutional challenges) and divergences (e.g., confidence levels or linguistic background). Throughout, we were reflexive, discussing interpretations within the research team and engaging participants for clarification where needed. Member-checking was built into the process to ensure that narrative accounts accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's ethics review board. Participants provided informed consent, were assured confidentiality, and could withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying information has been excluded or anonymised.

The primary researcher, being a Pakistani L2 English speaker and educator, shared cultural and linguistic ground with participants. This facilitated rapport and deeper understanding of certain contextual references. At the same time, we remained vigilant about the influence of researcher subjectivity and engaged in continuous reflexivity and consultation to preserve the integrity of participants' narratives.

4. Results and Findings

In this section, we set out each of the five participants' narrative accounts in their own words (quoted speech from interviews) with explanatory detail. Following Ivanič's framework, we point to aspects of their autobiographical-selves (previous experiences and emotions they bring to writing), discoursal-selves (how they self-present in their texts), and authorial-selves (stance and sense of authority). Every story is unique, but there will be threads of similarity that we will investigate later in the Discussion.

4.1. Aamna Ashraf: From Struggling Student to Emerging Author

Aamna Ashraf is a 26-year-old student who often described herself as a "*simple girl from a* village" exploring the big world of academia. Initially trained in English until eighth grade, she developed early writing skills through essays and storytelling, supported by her mother and teachers. The transition to Urdu-medium instruction challenged her confidence and writing fluency, but she maintained her engagement through journaling. Aamna Ashraf's first encounter with extended English writing was during college when she had to write short essays in an undergraduate English literature class. She remembers this as a turning point:

> I wrote my first formal essay in English in BA program. It was only two pages, but I struggled so much. [Laughs] I recall sitting with an English-Urdu dictionary and literally translating my thoughts. (Aamna Ashraf, Interview)

This extract captures the painstaking nature of Aamna Ashraf's early writing efforts. Her autobiographical-self was deeply rooted in her mother tongue (Urdu) and the community-oriented culture of her village. Writing, for her, had always been about reproducing knowledge (for example, memorising answers and writing them in exams) rather than expressing original ideas. When she began the MA TESOL program, Aamna Ashraf felt unprepared and insecure about her English writing. She said:

> In my first semester, I was very quiet. I thought my English was not good enough. When I had to write assignments, I felt I have no voice. It's like I cannot show who I am in English. I was afraid whatever I write will be wrong. (Aamna Ashraf, Interview)

This candid admission illustrates the discoursal-self that Aamna Ashraf projected (or rather, hesitated to project) in initial stages: virtually voiceless, overly cautious, and dominated by fear of error. She often compared herself to classmates who had urban, English-medium backgrounds, perceiving them as "confident and flowing" in writing, whereas she described her own writing as "broken and unsure." This lack of confidence was clearly reflected in the feedback she received

from faculty members. One professor wrote on her paper: that her ideas were interesting, but her language lacked confidence.

Aamna's overuse of qualifiers and reluctance to use 'I' signalled an underdeveloped authorial-self. Her perception of English as a language that excluded her personal identity restricted her stance-taking capacity. A transformative moment occurred during a reflective writing assignment:

> I poured my heart into that reflection… When I got it back, the professor had written: 'Thank you for sharing your voice. This was powerful.' That was the first time I felt that maybe… my own voice had a place in my English writing.

This validation bridged her autobiographical and discoursal-selves, enabling her to see personal voice as compatible with academic writing. In later assignments, she began articulating arguments with more clarity:

> I wrote: As a product of a rural schooling system, I can testify that rote memorisation stifles creativity.

This marked a shift toward a developing authorial identity, i.e., one that integrated experience with argumentation. Although she remained aware of linguistic limitations and described her writing as "Desi-English," her reflections suggested increasing confidence:

> Now when I write, I don't feel like that lost girl anymore… I think I have become a writer, not just a student writing for grades.

Aamna's evolving writer identity demonstrates how agency in L2 writing is constructed gradually, not merely through linguistic mastery but through feedback, reflective practice, and the creation of institutional space for voice. Her case underscores Ivanič's (1998) assertion that identity in academic writing is shaped through the interaction of lived history, discourse norms, and textual positioning.

4.2 Nimra Rasheed: Negotiating Academic Voice and Confidence

Nimra Rasheed, 25, presents a different yet complementary portrait of writer identity development. Hailing from a cosmopolitan city and educated entirely in English from primary school onwards, Nimra Rasheed entered the MA TESOL program with what appeared to be a strong foundation in English. On the surface, she was fluent and articulate; instructors initially assumed she would have little trouble with academic writing. However, Nimra Rasheed's narrative reveals that fluency does not automatically translate to writerly confidence or authorial presence.

In her interviews, Nimra Rasheed described herself as *"a rule-follower"* in writing. She excelled in her O-Levels and A-Levels (British curriculum exams) by mastering the template responses for literature and language exams. *"I knew exactly how to write to get an A,"* she said, referring to the five-paragraph essay structure and the polished, if somewhat formulaic, style she had internalised. This background shaped her discoursal-self as she entered the MA program, resulting in an academic voice that closely followed the conventions she had been taught, in other words, a largely pre-constructed or rehearsed academic voice. Yet, as she soon discovered, graduate-level writing demanded more than a well-structured essay; it required critical thinking, originality, and a degree of personal engagement that she found challenging.

One of Nimra Rasheed's early struggles was finding her stance. In a class on second language acquisition, she was tasked with writing a position paper on a controversial issue (the role of grammar instruction). She recounted her discomfort:

> I read so many articles for that paper, and most of them conflicted. I was afraid to choose a side. My draft was basically a patchwork of what others said. When my professor asked, "What do you think?", I realised I hadn't actually put myself in there at all. (Nimra Rasheed, Interview)

This incident highlights a gap in Nimra Rasheed's authorial-self at the time. Although she had no problem understanding complex readings or summarising them, she struggled to assert an independent voice or opinion. Her paper lacked a clear authorial stance, reflecting an underlying self-doubt: *Who am I to say which approach is better?* This echoes a common challenge for L2 writers described in the literature – the deference to established authorities and reluctance to claim

expertise. Nimra Rasheed's autobiographical-self helps explain this. She shared a telling memory from high school:

> In my A-Levels, I once wrote an analysis of a poem where I offered a different interpretation than what our teacher gave in class. I thought I was being insightful, but I got marked down. The teacher said, "You missed the point; stick to the notes". That taught me that in academic writing, originality was risky. So, I learned not to take chances. (Nimra Rasheed, Interview)

This anecdote shows how Nimra Rasheed's previous schooling had implicitly shaped her to be a cautious writer who valued correctness over creativity. Her autobiographical narrative included praise for *compliance* and penalties for *deviation*, which left her with an ingrained hesitancy to put forth her own interpretations. Thus, at the start of the MA, her discoursal-self was indeed polished and grammatically sound, but somewhat impersonal and derivative, and her authorial-self was subdued.

The turning point for Nimra Rasheed came through mentorship and self-reflection. A faculty mentor (who supervised her thesis later) played a significant role. Nimra Rasheed recalls a meeting where the mentor challenged her writing approach directly:

> She told me, "Nimra, your language is excellent, but I don't hear you in this paper." I was perplexed. Wasn't the goal to sound academic? And she said, Academic does not mean copying others' voices. It means engaging them with your own." That conversation was transformative for my understanding. I had equated sounding academic with sounding aloof, almost as if I must erase myself. She gave me permission to be present in my writing. (Nimra Rasheed, Interview)

Encouraged by this, Nimra Rasheed worked on developing her voice. One strategy she found helpful was free-writing her initial thoughts (in a rough form, even mixing Urdu and English) before starting a formal assignment. She noted that this helped her identify what she actually thought, which she could then substantiate with research. It was a shift from *outside-in* writing

(starting from sources) to *inside-out* writing (starting from her perspective and then aligning with sources), as she described it. With practice, her discoursal-self became more distinct. She started to allow a bit of personality into her academic prose – for instance, using the first person "I" in her thesis introduction to outline her motivations for the study, something she previously would have avoided. By the end of the study, Nimra Rasheed described her writer identity in these terms:

> I have become more comfortable in my skin when I write. I know I can write an academic paper that is me – my thoughts in an academic style. I do follow the rules, but I also make choices now, like deciding when to follow a rule and when to bend it. It's like I've finally learned the dance steps, and now I can add my own flair to it. (Nimra Rasheed, Interview)

This metaphor of knowing the "dance steps" (conventions) and adding her "flair" nicely encapsulates the integration of discoursal conventions with personal voice. Nimra Rasheed's case highlights the delicate process of building confidence: it required unlearning some earlier lessons and internalising a new understanding of what it means to be an academic writer. It also underscores the role of supportive mentors in identity development – someone explicitly telling her that *her voice mattered* was a catalyst for change.

Nimra Rasheed's story is about negotiation and balance. She negotiated between the rigid, risk-averse identity formed in her past and the more engaged, assertive identity she aspired to as a graduate student. The changes in her approach – from how she brainstormed to how she positioned herself vis-à-vis other scholars – demonstrate growth in all three of Ivanič's identity aspects: her autobiographical-self became more empowered, her discoursal-self gained a clearer, more genuine voice, and her authorial-self grew more confident in taking a stand. Nimra Rasheed's experience suggests that even students who appear 'good writers' by surface standards may need guidance and encouragement to truly own their writing and identity.

4.3 Buland Iqbal: Embracing a Multilingual Authorial Identity

Buland Iqbal, 27, brought a rich linguistic and disciplinary background to her MA studies. She grew up in a Punjabi-speaking family, attained formal education in Urdu up to high school, and

then pursued a Bachelor's in Computer Science where English was the medium of instruction. Switching to TESOL for her Master's was part of a larger career change fuelled by her passion for language and teaching. Buland Iqbal's narrative is distinct in that she actively grappled with *multilingualism and identity* in her writing, and she was perhaps the most overtly reflective about identity from the outset.

From the beginning, Buland Iqbal saw writing as a creative and expressive act. She mentioned that during her tech career, she maintained a personal blog in which she would write articles in English, sometimes blending in Urdu phrases, about technology and social issues. She said, "*I wasn't an academic, but I was a blogger,"* indicating that she already identified as a writer in a general sense. This extra-academic writing gave her a certain ease in putting words on a page. However, Buland Iqbal soon discovered that academic writing genre was a different beast, with conventions that sometimes felt constraining.

In the first interview, Buland Iqbal shared a vivid metaphor:

> "Writing academic papers in English felt like I was wearing someone else's suit, it conformed to academic norms but felt somewhat uncomfortable. I kept wanting to roll up the sleeves or loosen the tie, figuratively speaking. (Buland Iqbal, Interview)

This colourful description captures the tension between Buland Iqbal's discoursal-self and the academic discourse conventions she was learning. She had a tendency to inject a storytelling style into her assignments, which was not always appreciated by instructors expecting a more straightforward structure. For instance, in one assignment on classroom management, Buland Iqbal opened with a brief anecdote (a strategy from her blogging habit). She was told to move it to later or remove it to meet academic expectations. *"I felt a bit suffocated by the rigidity,"* she admitted, *"but I also understood I needed to play by the rules to some extent."*

One salient aspect of Buland Iqbal's journey was her use of translanguaging – the blending or alternating of languages – in her thinking and sometimes in drafting. She recounted an experience during her thesis writing where she was trying to articulate a complex idea about bilingual education:

> I remember I jotted down a paragraph first in Urdu because the concept was clearer to me that way. Then I translated it to English and polished it. That helped me say what I really meant. This led me to question whether I could incorporate elements of Urdu in my English writing when it's so much part of my thought process? (Buland Iqbal, Interview)

This reflection shows Buland Iqbal's keen awareness of her autobiographical-self as a multilingual person and the desire to have that reflected in her discoursal-self. In formal submissions, of course, she mostly wrote in English only, but she did occasionally use an Urdu proverb or culturally specific term, with explanation, to drive a point home. For example, in a paper about motivation, he used the Urdu term *"zikr"* (meaning repetitive remembrance) to draw a parallel with rote memorisation, then explained it in English[note: explanatory citation not needed, this is her writing]. She noted, *"My professor actually liked that I brought a local perspective, as long as I clarified it. That was encouraging"*.

Buland Iqbal's authorial-self developed strongly through the program, but not linearly. She had an intrinsic confidence (perhaps from professional experience) in her ability to communicate, yet she sometimes doubted her scholarly authority. She explained this duality:

> On my blog, I wrote as an expert to an audience. In my academic papers, initially I felt I was a nobody trying to satisfy a professor. That was humbling – in a good way, because I needed to learn. But over time, I realised I can be an expert in my own small area. My thesis research on a local school – for that context, I am kind of an expert now. That realisation made me write the discussion chapter very differently – I spoke with conviction, not just saying 'the data suggests' but also 'I argue that…'. It felt great to do that. (Buland Iqbal, Interview)

Indeed, by conducting a thesis study (she did case studies of bilingual teaching practices in two schools), Buland Iqbal accumulated knowledge that gave her a sense of *ownership* over her content. Her writing in the latter part of the program reflected this: peers who read her drafts observed a clearer "voice" and saw *Buland Iqbal's personality and convictions* coming through.

One peer commented (as Buland Iqbal reported) that reading her paper was *"like having a conversation with Buland Iqbal – I can tell it's you speaking"*, which she took as a high form of compliment.

Another dimension to Buland Iqbal's identity construction was her embrace of being a *"Pakistani English writer"*. She discussed how early on she felt a bit at odds with the Western theories and examples that dominated course readings. *"I kept looking for studies from Pakistan in the references, and there were few,"* she said. This realisation increased her determination to bring local context into her writing, as mentioned earlier. It also related to a broader identity stance: rather than seeing herself as a non-native speaker trying to write like a native, she started seeing himself as a *bilingual writer with a unique perspective*. She articulated this shift eloquently:

> I used to measure my writing against some imagined Western standard. Now I see that my strength is that I can write with a blend of perspectives. I can cite a famous theorist and also quote an Urdu saying, and together they can make a point more powerful. I no longer feel I have to erase where I come from to write in English. In fact, I embrace it. I think that makes my writing richer. (Buland Iqbal, Interview)

This statement indicates a mature and positive writer identity which aligns with the call by Yazan and Rudolph (2018) for L2 English teachers and writers to move beyond the deficit-oriented 'non-native speaker' label toward a resource-oriented, transnational and translingual sense of identity. Buland Iqbal, through reflection and practice, reached a point of identity integration. Where she notices no contradiction in being authentically Pakistani and at the me time, authentically a writer in English.

In practical terms, Buland Iqbal's later works included confident critiques of how imported education models fit (or don't fit) the local context, with her speaking as an *insider*. She even got an opportunity to present a paper at a national graduate conference, which further validated her authorial identity. Presenting in English to an audience and handling the question and answer session gave her a boost. *"I realised I can hold my ground in academic discourse,"* she said, which fed back into how she approached writing, with more assurance.

4.4 Shagufta: Negotiating Academic Voice Under Institutional Pressure

Shagufta's narrative highlights the institutional reinforcement of academic norms that prioritise objectivity and detachment which are norms which directly constrain the discoursal and authorial-selves described by Ivanič (1998). As a student shaped by English-medium education, Shagufta was expected to adopt the role of a "detached observer," a discursive position that directly conflicts with her desire for subjective expression, particularly within qualitative research paradigms. Her reflection:

> I was not allowed to use personal pronouns in my writing.

Illustrates the suppression of the autobiographical-self, which Ivanič identifies as the repository of a writer's personal history, experiences, and values. This suppression is further evidenced in her response to her Head of Department's directive:

> The HOD's insistence on objectivity stripped my writing of the personal element I wanted to include.

The feedback she received demanded adherence to depersonalised academic discourse, creating a gap between her internal sense of self and the institutional discourse she was required to perform. As Norton (2000) and Shuck (2010) argue, L2 writers often find themselves navigating an academic space that delegitimises their personal linguistic histories. Shagufta's attempt to reconcile her qualitative epistemology with rigid academic expectations reflects this conflict.

This misalignment also illustrates what Canagarajah (2020) describes as the denial of translingual agency, i.e., the ability to draw upon multiple discourses and linguistic identities in academic writing. Shagufta's comments reveal a sense of loss and detachment, signalling a discoursal-self moulded by institutional constraint rather than creative engagement:

> Teachers usually advise us to remain silent about ourselves in academic writing. They always advise us to 'silence your voice.

Epitomises the internalisation of external norms, which in Ivanič's model, inhibits the formation of a confident authorial-self. Still, through publication and reflective assignments, Shagufta gradually repositioned herself. The iterative process of writing and receiving constructive feedback promoted what Ivanič refers to as "possibilities for selfhood" (p. 228), i.e., institutionally sanctioned spaces that allow personal voice to surface. Over time, her professional identity as a researcher and teacher enabled her to reassert a sense of authorship:

> Writing those papers and reflections, and then going on to publish in different journals, has been a major factor in developing my identity as a teacher and as a researcher.

In this shift, we observe the reconfiguration of her authorial-self, i.e., a reassertion of agency through scholarly legitimacy, despite an earlier context of suppression.

4.5 Sidra: Evolving from Structural Conformity to Practical Application

Sidra's account foregrounds the transformation of writer identity through adaptive alignment with institutional discourse norms. Her narrative aligns with Ivanič's framework, demonstrating how L2 writers consciously recalibrate their autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial-selves in response to systemic expectations. Early in her academic career, Sidra adopted a strategic conformity to academic conventions:

> In BA, our teachers always appreciated the kind of writing which is rather formal. In formal writing, one just writes objectively…

This self-representation highlights her initial discoursal-self as passive and compliant, shaped by the demand for objectivity that de-emphasises personal agency. Following Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003), such compliance reflects L2 writers' uncertainty about what forms of self are institutionally permissible. The suppression of personal voice, while strategic, limited the expression of her autobiographical-self.

Yet Sidra's commitment to feedback reflects a constructive orientation toward institutional critique. She actively sought evaluation as a means of refining her practice:

> I always believed that I would groom my writing more through evaluation and feedback… I never ever felt ashamed even if the teacher is telling me that I am not good at writing.

This suggests an emerging authorial-self, i.e., being aware of the academic structures but seeking agency within them. Still, her later disillusionment with the limited and generic nature of MA-level feedback reveals the fragile conditions under which writer identity develops. The lack of dialogic feedback hindered the co-construction of knowledge that narrative inquiry privileges (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Sidra's move toward contextually grounded academic work, particularly her desire to align writing with real classroom concerns, further reflects the emergence of a more situated and reflexive authorial-self:

> During my MA, I often felt that the theories we studied were far removed from the realities of teaching. This pushed me to write about issues that teachers face in real classrooms rather than just discussing abstract ideas.

This represents a partial shift toward what Canagarajah (2015, 437) calls a voice that is "everyday practice for those from multilingual communities". Her writer identity was no longer just shaped by external academic conventions but by her own pedagogical insights and lived experience.

Sidra's story, therefore, illustrates both the internalisation and transformation of institutional norms. Her journey confirms Hyland's (2012) observation that writer identity in L2 contexts is best understood as an evolving negotiation between self-perception, academic expectations, and institutional affordances. Through strategic compliance and eventual critical engagement, Sidra developed an academic voice that was simultaneously institutionally credible and personally relevant.

5. Discussion

This study investigated how five Pakistani MA TESOL students perceived and constructed their writer identities in academic English, drawing on Ivanič's (1998) model of the autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial-self. The narratives reveal identity formation as a complex, iterative process shaped by prior schooling, institutional norms, language ideologies, and evolving self-awareness. The discussion below synthesises cross-case insights and connects them to broader theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Analysing the cases collectively reveals both commonalities and variation in how participants responded to institutional pressures and the challenge of asserting authorial voice. For instance, while all participants acknowledged struggling with the expectation to write objectively, those with early access to supportive mentorship navigated these pressures more confidently, gradually asserting their own perspectives in academic prose. In contrast, participants without such support tended to rely more on cautious, formulaic writing and were slower to claim ownership of their ideas. This synthesis highlights mentorship and educational background as critical mediating factors in the development of both discoursal- and authorial-selves.

5.1 Autobiographical-self: Institutional Memory and Linguistic Socialisation

Participants' autobiographical-selves were deeply influenced by their early educational contexts. Aamna and Sidra, who came from Urdu-medium or mixed schooling, carried a sense of marginality into their postgraduate writing. This echoes the observation by Casanave (2002) that past institutional experiences continue to structure present writing behaviours. Participants like Nimra, though schooled in English-medium institutions, also revealed internalised constraints particularly an ingrained fear of deviating from fixed interpretative norms, a result of exam-centric assessment practices. These findings reinforce Norton's (2000) argument that identity is historically situated and shaped by power-laden literacy practices. For several participants, early discouragement or absence of personal expression in writing became an internal barrier to academic voice during MA studies.

5.2 Discoursal-self: Negotiating Textual Presence and Academic Legitimacy

A key challenge identified across narratives was the negotiation of a discoursal-self within the confines of expected academic conventions. Initially, many participants described their writing as

voiceless or overly cautious. Aamna avoided first-person pronouns; Nimra over-relied on citation to appear authoritative; Shagufta was explicitly instructed to eliminate personal voice for the sake of 'objectivity'. These accounts reflect Helms-Park and Stapleton's (2003) findings on the anxiety L2 writers feel when navigating what counts as an acceptable academic self.

However, as participants gained exposure to more reflective and interpretive assignments, they gradually developed a more agentive discoursal presence. For instance, Buland's willingness to incorporate Urdu proverbs and local perspectives while remaining within the bounds of academic formality signalled a redefinition of legitimacy. This aligns with Canagarajah's (2020) advocacy for a translingual orientation that recognises multilingual voice as a resource rather than a deviation.

5.3 Authorial-self: Asserting Ownership and Academic Authority

Growth in the authorial-self emerged as a gradual yet significant shift in all five cases. At the outset, participants expressed hesitation in advancing claims without hedging, often framing their ideas tentatively (e.g., 'perhaps', 'it might be'). Over time, most came to recognise their situated expertise especially in relation to their thesis topics. For example, Aamna's use of her own educational background as evidence in critiquing rote learning, and Buland's confident stance in her discussion chapter, demonstrated a movement from reporting knowledge to constructing it.

This development supports Hyland's (2012) argument that writer identity is not only about textual representation but about epistemological stance. When participants began to see themselves as knowledge producers rather than passive learners, their authorial-selves became more prominent. The findings also resonate with Yazan et al. (2018), who suggest that L2 educators often reject deficit-oriented models of non-native writing in favour of constructing hybrid, context-sensitive academic identities.

5.4 Constraints and Enablers of Identity Development

Institutional factors played a dual role, both enabling and constraining identity construction. Supportive mentorship (as seen in Nimra and Buland's cases) created conditions for voice development, while rigid expectations around objectivity (as in Shagufta's account) stifled expression. The limited feedback in some courses, described as "*generic*" or "*detached*," left participants uncertain about how to improve or assert their identities. These observations echo

Lillis and Turner's (2001) critique of academic conventions that render student writing "ritualised and impersonal," particularly for those operating outside dominant discourses.

At the same time, pedagogical interventions that invited personal narratives or situated reflection, such as reflective essays or qualitative thesis writing, enabled identity expression and confidence-building. The data suggests that assignments that explicitly validate students' linguistic backgrounds and lived experiences play a key role in supporting identity integration.

5.5 Rethinking L2 Academic Writing Pedagogy

The study highlights the need to rethink how L2 academic writing is taught in multilingual contexts like Pakistan. The assumption that fluency in English automatically translates to confident academic writing is challenged here, as even English-medium students struggled with authorial presence. TESOL pedagogies should extend beyond grammar and structural accuracy, and toward promoting academic voice through dialogic feedback, reflective writing, and translingual affordances. Students benefit when writing is framed not merely as output but as identity work (Ivanič, 1998; Hanauer, 2012).

Moreover, the participants' multilingual practices (e.g., drafting in Urdu, translanguaging during interviews, referencing local metaphors) suggest that rigid English-only norms may be pedagogically counterproductive. As Canagarajah (2015) argues, translanguaging allows writers to access their full linguistic repertoire, facilitating more authentic and situated meaning-making. Institutional frameworks need to acknowledge these realities and build inclusive spaces where diverse writer identities are not only permitted but encouraged.

6. Implications

Although prior research in Western and East Asian contexts has examined issues of voice and identity among L2 writers, this study foregrounds the unique and compounded influence of Pakistan's postcolonial context, institutional rigidity, and prevailing social attitudes. In contrast to regions where supportive mentorship and dialogic pedagogies are more prevalent, participants in this study frequently described a sustained absence of guidance and limited opportunities for identity negotiation, often not encountering such support until the later stages of their academic journey. This divergence from environments with well-established support mechanisms for L2 academic writers underscores the need for context-specific interventions.

This research advances the existing literature by illuminating the dynamic relationship between autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial-selves as students move through different levels of the Pakistani education system. The findings demonstrate that linguistic and institutional barriers can be overcome through carefully designed support structures, mentorship initiatives, and innovative curricular practices, insights that have relevance for TESOL programs not only in Pakistan but also in other multilingual and postcolonial educational contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how Pakistani MA TESOL students construct their writer identities in academic English, using Ivanič's (1998) framework of autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial-selves. The findings demonstrate that identity construction in L2 academic writing is neither linear nor uniform. Participants brought with them diverse educational trajectories ranging from rural Urdu-medium backgrounds to urban English-medium schooling. These influenced their initial confidence, textual choices, and sense of authorship. For some, prior schooling encouraged compliance and discouraged voice; for others, transitions across disciplines or language mediums introduced anxiety but also prompted reflective engagement.

While early narratives often reflected hesitancy and self-doubt marked by rigid adherence to citation practices, avoidance of personal voice, and fear of academic judgment, participants gradually developed more agentive writer identities. Supportive mentorship, opportunities for reflective writing, and thesis research that aligned with lived experiences were critical in promoting this shift.

The study highlights the importance of pedagogical practices that validate students' linguistic and cultural resources. When learners are encouraged to draw on their multilingual repertoires and personal histories, they are better positioned to develop a meaningful, confident academic voice. The assumption that English proficiency alone ensures academic competence is challenged here, highlighting the need for more context-sensitive and identity-aware writing instruction in TESOL programs.

This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views L2 writing as a socially situated act. By foregrounding the voices of Pakistani students, it calls attention to the specific struggles and strategies of writers working in postcolonial, multilingual settings which are contexts in which language learning intersects with broader questions of belonging, legitimacy,

and agency. Academic writing, in such spaces, is not merely a skill to be mastered, but a site of identity formation, resistance, and growth.

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