



Narratives of Struggle: Understanding Writer Identity in the UAE

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Abstract: This paper discusses the inequitable social structure of the classroom itself, upheld by the dominance of English, which has contributed to a conflicted writer identity among many university-level writing students in the UAE. Moreover, it explores how autobiographical narratives can positively impact students who lack motivation to write academically.

Keywords: identity, writing, autobiographical narratives, English, motivation theory

1. INTRODUCTION

What made my classroom situation so terrible was getting a 64 on my first assignment. "The lowest mark anyone got," said the English teacher. And the cruel part was being recognized as the "64 Girl," not Yara, by my classmates. My helpless reaction had always been the same, just a fake smile whenever hearing someone say, "64 Girl." But deep inside, I wished I could be transparent and disappear from their eyes.

—excerpt from Yara's autobiographical narrative

This qualitative study explores issues of linguistic power and classroom motivation in relation to my students' writer identities. The results presented in the study are based on 80 autobiographical narratives from my intermediate-level composition students about their previous difficulties writing in English. First, I discuss four specific autobiographical narratives in detail as representative samples of conflicted writer identities constructed in an English-language classroom. Then, to further understand my students' perceptions of their writer selves, I conduct in-depth interviews on the same four students, focusing on how their autobiographical narratives helped them rethink their writer identities and notions of motivation.

I chose this topic based on my observations teaching composition to multilingual students at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for four years. During this time, I have worked with students whose backgrounds span a multitude of countries, cultures, and languages that have converged throughout their childhoods into one academic space: the English classroom. However, while my students have been educated in English since elementary or secondary school, many arrive at university with a general lack of motivation for their composition courses (Sayed, 2012). A common assumption among my colleagues is that students resist writing because, like Yara, English is not their native language. However, in order to be placed into my intermediate course, students are administered an English Placement Exam (EPT) designed by the Writing Studies department, which ranks their proficiency in academic writing on par with entry-level composition courses found in most American universities. And, if they do not immediately place into my course as incoming freshmen, students must first successfully complete a beginning-level writing course. Therefore, while my students have the *ability* to write in academic English, I feel that their past experiences, prior to their arrival at university, have led to their resistance to writing.

2. STUDY PROBLEM

Thinking back to Yara, her autobiographical narrative is a powerful example of how social interactions in the classroom can co-construct a writer identity equated with failing: She became a nameless



student, only acknowledged for her grade of “64,” which negated her ability to write in English among her peers and teacher. As Syed (2003) points out, linguistic and cultural differences between teachers and learners are a serious problem in the Gulf classroom, resulting in a “distancing effect” among students and their subjects of study. In fact, the instructors can easily take on what Bhaba (1994) calls a “civilizing” role, not unlike past colonizers, by expecting their students to adapt themselves and their values to the norms of an English-based and western-ruled curriculum. Therefore, I believe the inequitable social structure of the classroom itself, upheld by the dominance of English, has contributed to a conflicted writer identity among many of my students, which has impacted their lack of motivation (Norton, 2000). This has led me to view the composition classroom as a “site of struggle” (Weedon, 1997), in which students must negotiate their sense of self in relation to sociocultural interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on this observation, my research questions are: **(1) How have past experiences in the English-writing classroom shaped my students’ writer identities? (2) How can autobiographical narratives transform students’ motivation in the composition classroom?**

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

English is the lingua franca among the UAE’s many different nationalities and Emirati locals (who only comprise 10 percent of the population), but it has also become the major language of instruction in schools throughout the country (Dhabi, 2004). An explosion of western-style universities in the Gulf region since the 1990s (Weber, 2011) has led many parents to enroll their children in English-speaking schools at the primary or secondary level in order to ensure them access to these elite institutions. As a result, the majority of my composition students have spent their childhoods learning English from mostly “imported foreigners” (Syed, 2003, p. 223) who also bring their own linguistic and cultural values into the classroom. Instead of being valued for their multilingual, multicultural competencies, students in the UAE are often made to feel inferior for what Pavlenko (2002) calls “the monolingual and monocultural bias” (p. 279) in modern multicultural classrooms.

The challenge, then, is how to address my students’ lack of motivation with so many multiple voices in one English-language classroom. Consistently, each semester, my colleagues and I are faced with students who withdraw early from our courses or repeatedly fail, yet we, as a writing department, have not attempted to find out why this is happening. This is a growing concern of

mine since all students pursuing a Bachelor’s degree at the American University of Sharjah must take four required general-education writing courses in order to graduate.

However, providing students with opportunities to explore discursive issues surrounding English in their lives is one step toward understanding their lack of motivation. Specifically, autobiographical narratives allow students to re-visit their past encounters in the classroom, which can help them connect their previous discursive self to their present discursive self (Park, 2013). Through this unveiling of their writer identities, students can become aware of particular moments in the classroom that have led to their lack of motivation (Norton, 2000; Park, 2013). As Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, and Riazi (2002) claim, reflexively analyzing one’s discursive autobiography helps students gain ownership of English so that they can expand and transform their writer selves. Therefore, the purpose of my study is two-fold: to shed light on students’ previous experiences writing in English in order to discover if autobiographical narratives can help motivate them in their current composition courses.

In the first part of this paper, I will review literature on English as linguistic power; motivation theory in the classroom; writer identity in the UAE; and autobiographical narratives as motivational tools in the composition classroom. Then, I will describe my methodology and methods of data collection. In the last part of my paper, I will present my findings of the study and examine the writing experiences of my students. Lastly, I will end with a reflection on pedagogical action for myself and other composition teachers, specifically those working in the Gulf.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

English as Linguistic Power

The theoretical framework I use in this study is poststructuralism, which supports the Vygotskian (1978) view that identities are socially, culturally, and historically constructed. Language, as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), both empowers and disempowers, which makes English composition classrooms, as particular “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998), hierarchical learning spaces for students. However, unlike Bourdieu, I also believe that linguistic power is a negotiable exchange in which the marginalized can seek opportunities for agency (Norton, 2000). For example, social environments, which are structured by unequal positions, such as teacher and student, are “sites of struggle,” according to Weedon’s (1997, p. 21) theory of subjectivity. But, if learners are able to construct their



own sense of self against the dominance of others, they can acquire social power within that community (Weedon, 1997). Many students lack the awareness that it is actually possible to contest those in power, such as teachers who uphold Standard English as the criteria for their writing (Fernsten, 2008), but I believe it is this very awareness of one's sociocultural status in the classroom that can empower students and transform their views about their writing. Norton's (2000) seminal case study on immigrant women in Canada, for example, supports the use of reflective writing for students to critically examine their linguistic power, and she attributed the success of her research outcomes to providing her subjects diaries to explore their autobiographical selves. Specifically, as her study progressed, her subjects began to write more and more about their agency both inside and outside the classroom, and how this impacted their sense of themselves as English learners. Norton (2000) concluded that allowing her participants to step out of their marginalized role as "student" and into the more powerful role of "ethnographer" allowed them to gain an awareness of their own investments in learning English, which was empowering and motivating to themselves as learners.

Motivation Theory in the Classroom

Norton (2000) claims that students' desires to invest in their learning are not just intrinsic to the learner, but rather, dependent on the complex, linguistic environment around them. Therefore, learning is not just an accumulation of skills and knowledge, but an "experience of identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 215) that is vulnerable to teachers' pedagogical practices, especially in an English classroom loaded with imperialistic associations (Canagarajah, 2006). If monolingual pedagogies dictate how students perceive themselves, then their desire to learn is based on who they want to become versus who they are allowed to become (West, 1992). In Yara's case, she was labeled the "64 Girl" in school at a time in her life when identity construction is most active and meaningful (Perez Gomez, 1998), and she became that girl in the eyes of her classmates and teacher. While Norton's notion of investment in a language depicts learners as "constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (p. 11), this implies that they are allowed the chance to do so. Coercive power relations between those in dominant positions, such as teachers, and those in subordinate positions, such as students, are often maintained so that the divisions remain inequitable (Cummins, 1996). Therefore, the process of renegotiating one's learner identity is difficult and complex (Hirano, 2009), and in many cases, a student's identity is maintained throughout their entire education, especially negatives ones shaped by the production of grades (Barab

& Duffy, 1998). However, as Norton (2000) and other researchers (Block, 2007; Fernsten, 2008; Pavlenko, 2001) have shown, writing about the self, in relation to one's own experiences in the classroom, can allow students to renegotiate their identities, and in fact, reconstruct those identities from negative ones to positive ones. Hirano (2009), in particular, used diary entries in her case study on negative learner identities in order for her participant to gain an awareness of his learning process. Hirano (2009) noted that the diary entries helped her participant view himself more positively as a learner because he was able to reflect on his past difficulties with English, and also his achievements, which made him more cognizant of his progress and more motivated to learn.

Writer Identity in the UAE

In relation to my own composition students, I view their motivation as an act of becoming or unbecoming, engaging or disengaging, with a fixed writer identity that was formed in the past and constructed against a pre-established concept of the "correct academic writer." This definition of writer identity is based on one of Ivancic's (2004) six "discoursal selves," which is built on a set of prescriptive skills. According to Ivancic (2004), "A substantial proportion of many writing curricula is founded on this belief that learning to write consists of learning a set of linguistic skills" (p. 227)," which only encourages students to mimic a form of correctness according to the Standard English paradigm.

Also, this "correct" writer identity ignores student demographics in places like the UAE in which multilingual, multicultural students are not necessarily native English speakers, but they are also not the traditional ESL student of the past: one who has moved to an English-speaking country with the need to assimilate by acquiring English as a second language. Instead, they are multi-competent language users, often living in their home country, who are being forced into a very one-dimensional "native vs. non-native" role, especially when it comes to writing in English. In fact, states Canagarajah (2006), many global institutions are expecting students to uphold these native-English norms even though multilingual users are beginning to outnumber native speakers at an increasing rate. Postcolonial educational policies in countries like the UAE dictate either "standard American" or "standard British" curriculums (Weber, 2011), which only perpetuate monolingual ideologies and linguistic hierarchies. Students whose written language does not fit the standard end up being labeled incompetent, deficient, or even, in the words of many of my own composition students, "bad writers" (Fernsten, 2008). Lam (2000), in her ethnographic study on discursive classroom



identities, discovered that her participant felt more excluded and marginalized within the sociocultural context of his own classroom than he did in the outside world because he was not a native speaker. Fernsten (2008), in her case study of writer identities in an American university, also addressed how classroom policies can lead to good/bad writer identities depending on students' proficiencies in written Standard English.

Autobiographical Narratives

Therefore, I am arguing for students to find their own authorship, their own textual space, within the "correct academic writer" identity that has been placed upon them and reinforced throughout their education. Autobiographical narratives that focus on writing struggles, I believe, can provide students the textual space to claim ownership of their academic words by discovering *how* their writer identities were formed during these moments of conflict (Park, 2013). Several examples of narratives being used as transformative tools in the fields of SLA and composition studies (Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Graddol, 1999; Norton, 1997, 2000; Pavlenko, 2001; Pennycook, 2000a, 2000b) highlight how students can "gain rare insight into [their] motivations, investments, struggles, losses, and gains" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 214). While this awareness does not necessarily make students "correct" academic writers, it does provide them an opportunity to interpret, and reinterpret, their classroom experiences and realize that they have the potential to become their "ideal self" (Dörnyei, 2005) as a writer. Dörnyei developed this concept of "ideal self" based on his large-scale, longitudinal study (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002) of Hungarian students' motivation toward learning a new language. He determined that an "internal process of identification within the person's self-concept" (p. 453) of an ideal self can ultimately influence that person's motivation.

Juxtaposed with Norton's (2000) previous research on external, sociocultural factors influencing student motivation, I believe, when it comes to writing, both external *and* internal factors must be addressed when assessing student motivation. This supports a recent, parallel development within the fields of SLA and motivation theory that acknowledges the potential for blending more traditional views of motivation as solely dependent on the learner (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Dörnyei, 1994, 1997) with a more modern, global view that notions of self and identity are socioculturally influenced by the outside world (Norton, 2000; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). If students are provided the space to reflect upon their classroom-influenced writing struggles (external factors), they can also create, through the reconstruction of their

narratives, an ideal self (internal factors) that is capable of reclaiming ownership of academic writing.

However, as Pavlenko (2002) and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2006) have noticed, there are limitations in SLA student motivation literature because it does not reflect the complexity of a modern, global, multilingual world, and instead focuses on monolingual, homogenous cultures. In addition, any current research using narratives in a classroom context take place, for the most part, in western academic institutions. No research involving autobiographical narratives and their impact on student motivation has been conducted in the Gulf region, which embodies the multilingual students that Pavlenko (2002) and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2006) describe as typical of today's English users. Therefore, I hope my study will spark interest in autobiographical narratives for classroom research in the Gulf region, and also, will address a major gap in literature on writer identity and motivation for university students in the UAE.

5. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

I used an exploratory, interpretive approach to my study in which the autobiographical narratives of my composition students were the main focus of my inquiry. This type of methodology works well within a poststructuralist framework because narratives capture the subjective, multiple perspectives of participants and how they position themselves in the world, highlighting the influence of culture and society in identity construction (Crotty, 1998; Pring, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). However, in order to ensure a better-rounded, multi-viewed understanding of the data, I also triangulated my methods by conducting a structured, close-ended questionnaire and in-depth, open-ended interviews with a much smaller selection of my students. Finally, in order to increase reliability and credibility in the questionnaire (Oppenheim, 1992; Morrison, 1993; Wilson & McLean, 1994), I first used a pilot, which helped me to eliminate ambiguity, redundancy, and unnecessary queries for when I administered my final questionnaire.

For my in-depth, open-ended interviews, I selected four participants whose autobiographical narratives I wanted to explore in more detail for my study. Therefore, I determined my questions in advance and asked them in the same order during the interviews. This increased my ability to organize, compare results, and analyze the data, but it also invited the risk of constraining or limiting natural, relevant answers (Cohen, et al., 2011). However, I tried to employ what Kvale (1996) calls "directive interviews," which entails encouraging dynamic, reciprocal interactions in order to move the conversation

further; also, by asking open-ended questions, I allowed room for more flexibility and depth of responses. At the same time, I was very aware of my influence as the interviewer, since I already had a pre-established relationship with my participants as their composition teacher. While Oppenheim (1992) claims this can lead to subjectivity and bias on the part of the interviewer, I felt that my understanding and knowledge of the autobiographical narratives, and my students themselves, helped me to ensure directiveness in my interviews.

6. PARTICIPANTS

I used a convenience sampling of 80 intermediate-level composition students from my four Fall 2013 university courses. Since my exploratory research does not seek to generalize about a larger population, but rather aims to provide insight about my students' subjective writing experiences, this type of sampling is appropriate for my study because it is necessary to use participants from my own classroom (Cohen et al., 2011). I obtained consent from all 80 of my participants to use their questionnaire data, and obtained additional consent to use certain data for publication regarding the four participants whose autobiographical narratives and in-depth interviews I also included in my study. (Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of these particular participants.)

All of my participants range in age between 17-20 years and are Middle Eastern, South Asian, or North African. The majority of participants are fluent in at least three languages, and over 51 percent have lived most of their entire lives in the UAE. While 80 percent consider Arabic their native language, 95 percent began learning English in elementary school, 2.5 percent began learning English in middle school, and the remaining 2.5 percent began learning English in secondary school. During middle school and secondary school, participants had native-English teachers for the majority of their classes. Ninety percent write in English on a daily basis and approximately 85 percent consider English their most fluent written language.

7. CONTEXT

The study was conducted at a private American university in the Gulf during fall 2013 in my four intermediate-level composition courses. During the third week of the semester, 80 participants responded to a 15-minute structured and close-ended questionnaire in the university's computer lab. Then, the following week, all participants were given the writing prompt below:

While the composition classroom is often a place of discovery and growth, it can also be a site of struggle for students. Reflect on your own past experiences writing in English. Describe one moment in the classroom in which you felt like a "bad" writer.

The writing prompt is based on conversations I have had with students during my four years teaching at the university in which students have consistently referred to themselves as "bad writers." While it might seem, at first glance, that the writing prompt steers students toward an expected—almost encouraged—response, I felt it was necessary to use a description that students placed upon themselves when I was trying to understand how their writer identities were formed. Yin (2009) states that researcher bias is unavoidable, especially when the researcher is a "participant observer" in the classroom, but I feel that my decision to use specific wording based on classroom observations allowed for more genuine responses. Since participants were familiar with the phrase "bad writer," including all its nuanced associations, I felt that they could better associate a past moment with this particular phrase rather than with an unfamiliar one I had created for them.

Participants had one month to generate ideas in their writing journals and submit a final, typed, 500-word autobiographical narrative to me. After collecting the 80 autobiographical narratives, participants responded to an additional, 5-minute questionnaire that focused on their actual experience writing the autobiographical narrative about a past struggle in an English-language classroom. Then, I selected four participants (one from each composition course) for in-depth, open-ended interviews in my office. The interviews took place during the third month of the semester and lasted approximately 20 minutes each. I chose these specific participants because their narratives represented major themes that had emerged from the questionnaire, which will be discussed in more detail below.

8. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Since qualitative data analysis involves making sense of the data through organizing, explaining, and putting the data into themes and categories (Cohen, et al., 2011), my interpretation as a researcher is necessary and unavoidable when analyzing the data. However, I sought to minimize the influence of personal bias and my own subjective interpretations by adopting an "exploratory content analysis" approach (Troudi, Coombe, & Al-Hamly, 2009), which involves an objective, systematic, and thematic method to analyzing the data.



A total of four “conflicted writer identity” themes emerged when I compared results between the questionnaire and autobiographical narratives, which stemmed from: (1) public ridicule by the teacher, (2) public ridicule by other students, (3) writing for the teacher’s expectations, and (4) conforming to an English writer identity. After I interviewed participants about their experiences writing autobiographical narratives based on past writing struggles, four additional themes emerged regarding notions of motivation in the composition classroom. Autobiographical narratives were found to: (1) establish an awareness of past writer identities; (2) clarify writing struggles; (3) create confidence for future writing; and (4) help define present writer identities. While it is beyond the scope of this study to include all the findings, the major themes are discussed below.

9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Creation of Conflicted Writer Identities

Based on the questionnaire, the majority of participants began to have negative experiences writing in English during middle school or secondary school. When asked about the types of challenges they had faced when writing in English during this time, four major themes emerged based on past experiences that involved: public ridicule by the teacher (24.09%); public ridicule by other students (23.33%); writing for the teacher’s expectations (21.05%); and conforming to an English writer identity (11.53%).

Public Ridicule by the Teacher

One theme many participants wrote about in their narratives was being publicly ridiculed by their writing teachers. In fact, several participants felt that their teachers blamed them for their writing errors instead of trying to help them learn. In Amani’s case, she was made to feel inferior because she did not possess the same level of knowledge as her teacher:

The one time I doubted myself more than ever was when my teacher dangled my “mistake” in front of the class and laughed at me. When I finally decided to speak up and question my teacher’s actions, she said, “I’m the one who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English, not you.”

—excerpt from Amani’s autobiographical narrative

This example supports Bourdieu’s (1977) theory that language, as symbolic power, constructs unequal relationships, especially in a classroom context where the teacher is a native speaker and the students are not. This inequality, according to Norton (2000), can easily affect

students’ investments in learning if they are made to feel incompetent for not being “correct academic writers” (Ivanic, 2004). As Amani admitted in her narrative:

I was afraid to write my assignments after that, and still, to this day, I do not know what I did wrong.

—excerpt from Amani’s autobiographical narrative

Public Ridicule by Other Students

Also, many participants felt that public ridicule by their peers was just as demotivating as being criticized by their teachers in front of the class. Since the teacher maintains power (Cummins, 1996) as the dominant language speaker, it is implied that students are the other, subordinate group, in the classroom. However, as both Cummins (1996) and Norton (2000) agree, it is possible for subordinate groups to also generate their own form of power, which means that the students, themselves, can acquire a dominant, influential role in the classroom. In Yara’s situation, this occurred because her writing skills were considered weaker than her fellow classmates; hence, she was called “The 64 Girl” and was made to feel inferior by students who had better language abilities than her.

In Amr’s case, however, his classmates quickly acknowledged that his writer identity was “correct” in the eyes of their teacher, which made him a threat to their own, pre-established “incorrect” writer identities. Eventually, the powerful, collective influence of Amr’s classmates forced him to change his writing:

Finally, I decided that I didn’t want to be different anymore. I didn’t want to be an outcast and I just wanted to blend in with the other kids. I forced myself to write like everyone else, in the most improper English I knew, writing everything wrong. After I turned in my assignment, I avoided eye contact with my teacher who looked very disappointed in me.

—excerpt from Amr’s autobiographical narrative

As Norton (2000) further explains, relations of power can “serve to enable or constrain” (p. 9), and in this situation, when a subordinate group felt vulnerable, it chose to constrain Amr.

Writing for the Teacher’s Expectations

Another major concern of participants was feeling that they had to imitate their teachers’ views in order to receive an acceptable grade on their writing assignments.



For Gheeda, this de-legitimized who she was as a writer and made her feel disengaged from the writing process:

The question asked for our opinion on a topic, and I wrote down what I felt and believed in, but the teacher didn't want that. "Your essay is incorrect; you clearly did not understand the simple question I gave you. It's not what I want." After that day, I wrote for my teacher and only for him. I made sure that everything I wrote was what he expected, but it was not me; it was not what I wanted to be.

—excerpt from Gheeda's autobiographical narrative

As mentioned earlier, if students are only allowed to become what their teachers want them to become in the classroom (West, 1992), then eventually they will resist learning. Since Gheeda could not construct a writer identity based on who she "wanted to be," she eventually lost interest in her writing class:

I dreaded the English period and I hated doing writing assignments. They felt like heavy stones placed on my chest, a load. I stopped trying by the end of the year.

—excerpt from Gheeda's autobiographical narrative

Conforming to an English Writer Identity

Other times, participants did not resist acquiring a writer identity that was deemed "correct" by their teachers, even though it entailed losing a sense of themselves. For Ahmed, he compartmentalized his Arabic-language identity and his English-language identity until he became someone completely new in the classroom:

I had to fit in. I had to "change." Ahmed is the old side of me with bad English. I asked my friends to correct my English and I was even given an English nickname: "Frank." My writing struggle was my life and changing was my aim, but I lost "Ahmed."

—excerpt from Ahmed's autobiographical narrative

While Ahmed was praised by his teacher for "changing," the result was a subtractive, rather than additive, process. Many multilingual students, such as my own, are encouraged to acquire a "correct" writer identity in English without any regard for their other languages. As Lin et.al (2002) remind us, standardization and nativization in the composition classroom only leads to an "inferior copy of the 'master's voice'" (p. 306), not a genuine construct of a correct writer identity. Since a

learner's investment in English is related to issues of agency, ownership, and identity (Norton, 2000), then motivating students to write must also allow for a sense of genuine authorship, not mimicry.

10. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES AS MOTIVATIONAL TOOLS

However, after conducting this study, I believe that students can attain a sense of ownership by authoring autobiographical narratives, which in turn, can help motivate them for future writing. Based on the second questionnaire, 71.79% of the participants strongly agreed that writing about their past experiences in the classroom has helped them view themselves more positively as a writer. And, 62.82% strongly agreed that writing more narratives in the future about specific struggles in the classroom would help motivate them for upcoming assignments.

Establish Awareness of Past Writer Identity

When Amani was interviewed about her experience writing an autobiographical narrative, she talked about discovering who she was as a past writer.

Question: *Did writing the narrative help you understand yourself more as a writer?*

Response: *I learned that acceptance, especially for my writing, was very important to me. I always put "myself" in my writing. I wanted to be accepted by my teacher. ... When I was told I made a mistake, I thought everything I did was a mistake.*

Too often, students accept the judgments of their teachers without understanding the sociocultural context of the classroom. Amani, unaware that her writing did not fit a specific, desired standard by her native-English teacher, began to believe that she was not an acceptable writer. However, both Lin et al. (2002) and Pavlenko (2002), in their research on narratives in the classroom, found that "awareness" was one of the first steps toward transformation. By gaining insight into her past writing struggles, Amani can now recognize that a "mistake" does not reflect her actual writer self, as she explained:

I've learned that just because I'm told I'm wrong, I shouldn't doubt myself. The narrative taught me not to doubt myself.

Clarify Writing Struggles

For Gheeda, the autobiographical narrative clarified her struggle with wanting to write honestly, or, as she



described: writing for herself versus writing for her teacher.

Question: *What did the narrative teach you about your past writing struggle?*

Response: *I learned I shouldn't write for others. This time, I was thankful I could write what I wanted. My honest words. ... I think my paper is better because I'm writing what I believe in now.*

This sense of authorship, of being treated as a legitimate writer, is an essential motivating factor for composition students (Lin et al., 2002; Park, 2013). When students are able to represent themselves in their own words—not the prescriptive words of their teachers—then the potential for them to invest in their academic writing can occur. As Gheeda revealed:

I wanted to be myself, and I am now. I have the freedom to write what I want.

Create Confidence for Future Writing

For Amr, his experience writing the autobiographical narrative gave him the confidence to “take a risk” with his next writing assignment.

Question: *Do you feel more motivated as a composition student after writing your autobiographical narrative?*

Response: *Yes. I wanted to choose something that wasn't safe for Essay Two, that no one else was writing about, because I felt like my writing was accepted for the first assignment. ... Maybe I can do what I want now, something more challenging, and not write about what everyone else is writing about. Something easy.*

In Amr's case, the autobiographical narrative allowed him to become the “ideal” writer he always wanted to be in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, if students are provided the textual space to write about their external struggles, then their internalized, “ideal self” (Dörnyei, 2005) can surface. For Amr, this entails being a student who outshines others, as he explained:

I learned that I shouldn't worry about peer pressure or standing out. In class, being special is something I always wanted to be.

Help Define Present Writer Identity

With Ahmed, the process of writing his autobiographical narrative helped him discover that he

could reconstruct—and even deconstruct—his identity as a writer.

Question: *How do you see yourself as a writer now?*

Response: *I learned that I could change. That I can still change. I don't blame English anymore, but I blame myself for letting myself change into Frank.*

This powerful admission reveals the conflict that multilingual speakers, such as Ahmed, contain inside themselves in relation to English. The dichotic boundaries created in writing classrooms, which support English and disregard all other languages, can fuel feelings of guilt and shame in students for becoming what was required of them: a writer of English. However, after writing his narrative, Ahmed realized that he could accept himself (Lin et al., 2002; Park, 2013), and in fact, be himself again in the composition classroom, as he described:

I want to be Ahmed again. I want to write for him.

11. CONCLUSION

While I believe that autobiographical narratives can be used as effective motivational tools in the classroom, students' writing struggles should not be explored as a quick-fix solution only to be ignored after they submit their papers. As Harris (1997) points out, there are “some real problems . . . with views of teaching that valorize conflict but fail to offer ways of bringing differing positions not simply in contact but also in meaningful interchange with each other” (p. 117). Therefore, the narratives should not be used in isolation, but rather, they should be part of an ongoing classroom curriculum in which instructors, along with their students, examine their experiences with the English language. By being open and honest about our own contributions as instructors within a dominant academic environment, we can help our students determine what factors in their lives have been controlling (or liberating) during the construction of their writer identities.

Therefore, the topic of “struggle” provides a way to study identity construction in the composition classroom because it is this very struggle that contains present answers to past writing failures. If we also provide our students with other writing opportunities beyond the narrative to explore and question English as practiced in global contexts, we could encourage further acceptance of our students' identities as multicultural, multilingual writers in English. While the dangers of English dominance are very real and often destructive to native languages, most of my students, especially at the



beginning of the semester, view the role of English as necessary to improve or maintain their economic standing or to give them social significance in today's global world. In the UAE, in particular, English is so pervasive in my students' lives that they tend to think it is no longer tied to any particular Anglo-American cultural associations; it is just a linguistic presence that is part of the national culture of the UAE. But in reality, English does carry colonial undertones that continue to dominate in schools throughout the Gulf region. By addressing the issues surrounding English in our classrooms, students can become more assertive, rather than passive, users of the language. They can begin to see how the construction of a writer identity in a multicultural space offers a potential way to work against and beyond the limits of the dominant discourse of English. And, I believe, this realization can help create a space for my students' marginalized voices to be heard, as was the case with Yara:

Now, I don't only want to improve my English. I want to prove to everyone I'm not a hopeless case.

-excerpt from Yara's interview

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