The Construction of Author Voice in a Second Language in Electronic Discourse

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While the study of written discourse that informs ESL writing has provided a number of insights into its conventional features and structures, individual variations such as voice and identity have largely been neglected. To examine how a socially situated notion of voice plays a role in disciplinary online writing, this study explored the co-construction of an author’s identity by peer readers in online written exchanges. The goal of this paper is thus to explore how voice articulated as sociocultural point of view is developed through dialogic interactions with others and how such development can be traced through the discursive constructs such as positioning, epistemic/affective stance, and intertextual relations. This study has important educational implications in relation to academic writing that is a critical issue for many Korean college students who pursue their studies in the United States in that the number of Korean international students has continued to increase in the U.S. universities.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of written discourse that informs English composition has mainly focused on general discourse features in that the goal of English language learning has been viewed as enabling English language learners including Korean students to produce texts that are relatively unmarked from the perspectives of native English speakers. This approach to academic writing is embedded in the view of English language teaching as the teaching of discursive forms and functions based on an accuracy of discourse used by native English speakers. While writing researchers have focused on normative aspects of written discourse, there has been little attention to concepts that include divergent aspects of discourse practices (i.e., voice, identity, and idiolect).

Given that the instructional needs of Korean students who are expected to know
unfamiliar discourse conventions, it is essential to include discourse features and functions in the study of English composition. Also it is important to have a deeper understanding of divergent aspects of discourse; a lack of understanding of individual variations in academic writing within cross-cultural academic contexts can result in cultural and linguistic determinism thereby preventing the richer development of academic literacy (Matsuda, 2001). The exclusive attention to normative aspects of discourse is not congruent with the provision of a full description of discourse practices. Furthermore, this kind of linguistic determinism can lead to the misconception that deviating from the norm of a particular genre is simply undesirable, whereas the actual discourse practices include divergences of various kinds, developing significant social meaning in the process. The sociocultural perspective to studying writing practices views “genres not as autonomous domains of discourse but as deeply and intricately interwoven in the whole fabric of cultural-historical activity” (Molle & Prior, 2008, p. 562). In this respect, it is misleading to analyze genre as a finite set of linguistic processes. This kind of analysis cannot account for the ways in which genres are seen as functioning in contexts. In fact academic genres are essentially multimodal in process and form; and the discursive character of particular texts is quite hybrid when considering genres from more deeply processual, semiotic, and dialogic perspectives (Molle & Prior, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is thus to expand the range of the qualitative inquiry to divergent aspects of written discourse by using the notion of voice and to elucidate its implications for writing research and instruction in English for academic purposes (EAP). It is difficult for students to find their own voice and at the same time to develop a voice that is appropriately academic in the context of writing. I discuss the issue of voice experiences or struggles, a part of the process by which an ESL learner becomes recognized as a member of a new discourse community.

I have chosen to examine electronic discourse because computer-mediated writing provides sites of discursive practices that have relatively fewer social constraints (e.g., copy editors or style manuals) compared to print media. For this reason, the online texts clearly reflect the student writer’s original choices. In addition, the presence of electronic discourse in the educational system has created multiple literacy requirements. In the current context of a proliferation of new forms with the incorporation of electronic writing in every aspect of academic life (e.g., Hirvela, 2005; Slaton, 1990), it becomes imperative to examine the new writing practice that students encounter when first introduced to the disciplinary practices of a new field. Indeed the online forum as composing disciplinary reading is now becoming an inevitable part of school genres (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995) in the U.S. universities, and the description of the writing practices in relation to the genre can contribute to the academic development of ESL students. Computer-mediated writing as a promoter of ESL students’ growth as expressive individuals has had wide
currency (e.g., Belcher, 1999; Canagarajah, 1997). Yet there is little work to date that has qualitatively explored how ESL learners actually experience their voices and identities that are constructed in computer-mediated writing particularly embedded in a disciplinary setting.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Background

Over the last decade or so, voice has been a critical term in the pages of the journals of composition studies and applied linguistics. Voice has served as a powerful metaphor for addressing the complexity of how writers establish an authorial identity in their writing, as shown by many studies exploring this (e.g., Clark & Ivanic, 1997; Elbow, 1994; Ivanic, 1998; Yancey, 1994). However, there have been some issues in terms of critiques of the notion in L2 writing studies. For example, Belcher and Hirvela (2001) in their case study showed how voice impacts the experiences or struggles of L2 writers and they paid attention to recognizing the L1 voice students already have. Furthermore, Ivanic and Camps (2001) expanded the role of voice by redefining voice as “self-representation” that is inherent in “all human activity” as well as writing (p. 4). In contrast to their focus on the importance of voice and authorial identity, Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) attempted to demonstrate its irrelevance to academic writing in a study investigating the relationship between voice-related textual features and the quality of undergraduate argumentative writing, and expressed skepticism over the value of voice in academic writing. Triggered by some researchers’ vocal discussion (see Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003) on the extent to which voice needs to be considered in L2 pedagogy, Matsuda and Tardy (2007), in their study of two readers who reviewed a simulated manuscript, highlighted the role of voice in academic writing and elucidated the need of further research into authorial identity construction.

It is within this context that the present study responds to the need of EAP literature that lacks in-depth analysis of L2 voices by taking a broader perspective on the language learner’s relationship with the learning context. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion of voices in a second language and introduce the consideration of electronic discourse into EAP.

In what follows, I present a brief introduction to the notions of voice and identity-in-interaction in one section, and on the affordances created by computer-mediated communication (CMC) in a second section, before proceeding to a description of the method I used in the study.
2. Situating Voice in a Sociocultural Plane

Voice has been used to capture the sense of identity in written discourse. It has been often associated with personal and individual writing while academic writing has been seen as impersonal. In a sense of Elbow (1994), the notion of voice carries with it the individual or personal quality in writing. Individualized voice had a relatively narrow set of discursive features: assertiveness, reiteration of the main point, and authorial presence. Elbow (1981) characterized voice as an attribute that “captures the sound of the individual on the page” (p. 287).

Given a growing awareness of the inevitability of identity in discourse as an expression of the social relations (Ivanic, 1998), there has been a shift from the traditional view of voice to the view of collective or social voices. For example, Matsuda (2001) stated that voice is not entirely tied to the ideology of western individualism and that voice results from (un)intentional use of “socially available yet ever-changing repertoires” (p. 40). In the context of academic writing, recent scholarly conversations of voice include this social view to voice thereby situating the term within sociocultural perspectives (Prior, 2001).

In this study, I rely on a sociocultural definition of voice as articulated in Matsuda (2001) to extend the concept beyond the individualistic conceptions. In his definition, voice is seen as “the amalgamative effect of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires” (p. 40); it is an effect derived from a result of the negotiation between the writer and the reader mediated by the text. His view reflects a critical awareness of identity in discourse as an expression of the surrounding social relations as well as the individual.

Matsuda (2001) makes clear that voice is distinguished from identity in that discoursal self and self as author, the two of four aspects of writer identity (“autobiographical self,” “discoursal self,” “self as author,” and “possibilities for self-hood”) are compatible with the notion of voice (see Clark & Ivanic, 1997). His definition expands the notion of voice to include not only writers and their uses of discursive features but also the amalgamative effect—that is, the readers’ rhetorical construction of voice. The readers draw on some of the discursive and non-discursive features when constructing certain images on the author. Unlike the traditional view of voice, the social perspective on voice is not entirely attached to the ideology of individualism.

Central to the notion of voice is the concept of identity-in-interaction. Foregrounding the situated character of talk embedded in the immediate discourse context, the notion of identity-in-interaction is closely attached to the dialogic nature of identity (Aronsson, 1998). It also advocates the idea of identity as a local phenomenon constituted in situated activities rather than as a global phenomenon. The basis of identity co-construction lies in the working of social interaction characterized by turn-taking organization and
participation. Linking these social identities with voice has been mainly discussed when addressing L1 composition courses (Barton & Ivanic, 1991; Bowden, 1999; Coles, 1988; Faigley, 1992). Yet the issue of social voice when writing in a second language remains to be more fully addressed.

3. CMC as a Context for Academic Voice

The concept of affordance coined by the perceptual psychologist James Gibson (1977) is seen as “a relationship between an organism (a learner in this case) and the environment that signals an opportunity for or inhibition from action” (van Lier, 2004, p. 4). CMC can afford unique learning contexts for L2 learners to expand the use of a second language and thus develop their academic competence (e.g., Belcher, 1999). The primary feature of CMC involves the social interaction that occurs through the conveying of messages through networked computers. Its interactional features can enable the learners’ language use and language socialization in unique ways. Particularly ESL learners whose anxiety in the company of native speakers affects their immersion into the new academic culture may need these technological affordances. For example, Belcher (1999) tested the role of CMC as enabling “an ethnorelativistic academic utopia” (p. 258) in her study of a class newsgroup in the blackboard discussion. As Belcher had encouraged students to raise the critical mindset in class, she found the students’ engagement with texts in online exchanges as very academic yet personalized so that those exchanges revealed students’ close reading and deep thoughts of the texts. She suggested that students could raise their self-identified voices with a degree of autonomy and professionalism in the class newsgroup to become members of an English-speaking academic community. Her major finding is that CMC was capable of increasing expert-novice interaction, native speaker-nonnative speaker contacts thereby creating new discursive environments in which “confidently self-identified voices” were heard (p. 264). In a study covering similar ground, Canagarajah (1997) analyzed African-American students’ textual discourses in the emails and electronic conferencing that were part of the course. He found that those students were more visible in online spaces than they were within the “public sites of the contact zone” (p. 176) and that they used these spaces to construct the new identities that were necessary for successful academic learning. He characterized online communities as a means of empowerment for minority students by offering “emotional sustenance and solidarity,” thus a safe space to develop their voices (p. 179). Whereas the nature of voice in these two studies is somewhat associated with individualistic voice, this study attempts to trace sociocultural aspects of voice enacted in online writing by using the discursive constructs such as epistemic/affective stance and intertextual relations.

CMC not only affords less anxiety-provoking means of communication within
classrooms (e.g., Beauvois, 1995; Kelm, 1992; Meunier, 1998) but also extends the interaction possibilities beyond the classroom walls (i.e., its time constraints and the limited circle of classroom group work). One way of thinking of CMC, especially when it takes place in educational environments, is to see it as developing what Lave and Wenger (1991) would call “a community of practice” for the creation of new knowledge and meaning. This feature of CMC can provide learners who are new to the community, or on the periphery, access to resources at the center of the community without having to be in the same location, thereby reducing differences in status within a certain community. For example, Kamhi-Stein (2000), in the study of the web-based bulletin board (BB) interaction of nonnative English speakers and native English speakers, reported that the BB discussions provided the participants with a sense of community and allowed them to participate at their own pace. Conducting ethnographic observations about BB postings by ESL students, Nguyen and Kellogg (2005) also suggested that the emergence of a community of practice took place in online discussions for learners to construct themselves in the second language.

In contrast to face-to-face interaction, online interactions allow for equal access to the floor (e.g., Warschauer, 1996). One's engagement in online discussions is not influenced by others' domination of the floor. Rather it depends on one's own investment on how to project one's voice in the discourse of the class as a community of practice. Allowing marginalized students within traditional classrooms to express themselves, CMC provides a source for participants to exercise their agency by interacting with one another and with new content and cultural norms (e.g., Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005). Inspired by these previous works, my study attempts to further explore how L2 graduate learners experience their academic voices through writing practices surrounding CMC. The goal of this paper is thus to explore how voice articulated as sociocultural point of view is developed through dialogic interactions with others and how such development can be traced through the discursive constructs such as positioning, epistemic/affective stance, and intertextual relations.

III. METHOD

1. Participant

The case study reported here is part of a larger research project that explored the process of academic literacy practices of L2 graduate students in a southwestern city in the United States. By employing Patton’s (1990) perspectives on purposeful sampling in qualitative
inquiry, I chose Blanca (a pseudonym\(^1\)), a master’s degree student from Mexico, as the focus of this study because I was interested in the voice experience of a novice ESL student writer. Criteria for selection as a focal participant included that she was in her first year of graduate studies pursuing a master degree in educational psychology, she had not had prior experience using an online forum as part of a disciplinary course, and she was a nonnative English speaker\(^2\). Online forum in an induction-level disciplinary course is a site in which voice should be treated as a relatively major concern for newcomers to an academic discipline like her in that beginning academic writers are expected to learn whether, when, and how to express their voices to make their writing more effective.

Blanca, a 25-year old woman, was a Spanish speaker from Mexico. She came to the U.S. with a strong motivation to learn about educational psychology and join the research community in that field. With respect to TOEFL and GRE, she exceeded the minimum scores required to study in U.S. graduate programs. For about 5 years, Blanca had worked with 3 to 5-year old children as an ESL teacher in Mexico before she came to the U.S. for the master's program in educational psychology. Although her undergraduate major had been psychology, she did not show strong confidence in her familiarity with the content of the class: “I took a course on language and cognition when I was an undergraduate. However, it was a very long time ago and do not remember so much” (Background Survey). Blanca was interested in this course in order to “deeply understand the process of learning” (Background Survey), as she wanted to become a specialist in curricular development after obtaining a master's degree. Blanca's other goal for taking this course was to “refresh and learn about learning theories and become more familiar with reading scientific literature.” Since her mother was running an ESL language institute in Mexico, she wanted to go back to Mexico after graduation to help her mother's work.

2. Setting

The study was conducted in a graduate content class offered by the department of educational psychology at an American research university. This class was designed to help newcomers to a discipline adjust to the theoretical history of educational psychology. The coursework in the class included readings on educational theory and research, oral discussions of the readings, online form postings of the readings, and writing projects. As part of the class requirements, students were given weekly articles to read and prepare

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\(^1\) All the participants were given pseudonyms in the write up of the study.

\(^2\) Although her English was good enough to study in the U.S., she was viewed as a novice student writer due to her lack of knowledge about disciplinary discourse that has been used in her discipline. That is, she was a newcomer to her discipline as an EAL (English as an academic language) learner.
prior to coming to class. Although the class met every week for 15 weeks, three of these meetings occurred as online forum postings. They joined the online sessions from home. The students were randomly assigned to small groups of five or six, and they discussed the weeks’ assigned readings within their groups (see Table 1). For each session, individual students were assigned to different groups in order to interact with a variety of students. They were aware of the class instructor’s (who was not the researcher) presence in all groups and of her actions to enhance and moderate the online discussions. Each online forum was followed after a short oral discussion in order to reflect on individual students’ experiences. The instructor was responsible for selecting discussion topics based on the weekly readings, setting the length of the discussion period, and keeping an active and involved discussion going throughout the specified session dates. After each online forum, she provided a brief review of the main issues discussed, the key points that participants made in each group, and any conclusions reached by groups at the end of each group discussion.

Out of 31 students enrolled in the class, 10 were nonnative English-speaking students and 21 were native English-speaking students. The ages of the students ranged from early 20s to late 40s, but the majority were in their 30s. Although NNS students’ oral and written skills varied considerably, their English proficiency was deemed sufficiently high for the mainstream class.

### TABLE 1
Overview of Online Forums: Length and Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Forum</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First session</td>
<td>From noon Sep 23 to midnight Sep 24</td>
<td>Achievement goals and achievement emotions, Emotions and classroom talk, Enjoyment and work habits in academic endeavors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second session</td>
<td>From 9 am Oct 21 to 1 pm Oct 23</td>
<td>Teacher knowledge and student achievement, Expertise as a process, Knowledge and literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third session</td>
<td>From 9 am Nov 18 to 2 pm Nov 20</td>
<td>Connecting home and school, Teacher-student interactions in the classroom, Caring relationships in the co-construction of mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Procedure

The primary sources of data, which had been collected during the fall semester of 2008, were participant observation and field notes, audiotaped interviews, CMC texts, background survey, and the students’ self-reports. With their permission, all students filled out a background survey in the first week of the semester. The background survey (Appendix A) included some questions about the students’ age, educational and professional backgrounds, their program of study, and their previous experiences with any course having a CMC component. Based on this background survey, I was able to choose Blanca as my focal student for the study. Next, I conducted semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) with Blanca within a week of an online forum. I structured these interviews to be as open-ended as possible but still “guided.” I began the interview in a very open-ended manner, simply asking Blanca to tell me about the experience in general (e.g., what’s your general impression about this particular online session?, How did you experience the forum?). Blanca and I then read through the whole CMC transcript together and I let her talk about such things as what was the major motivation for writing a particular message, how she chose to whom to respond, and what was the major concern in composing the message, etc. Then I asked her to talk about specific turns that I noted prior to the interview. I gave attention to places in the text where contextual cues or different voices seemed apparent.

To produce a self-report on the online forums as part of the class assignments, Blanca was expected to describe the learning she experienced, and any linguistic, cognitive, affective, social and cultural reactions that she had during the online forums.

4. Data Analysis

Analysis of data was recursive and dynamic throughout the study in order to identify themes and patterns that characterized Blanca’s computer-mediated writing. Because I was interested in how Blanca experienced voice in online writing practices, I searched for the patterns and themes around such practices. In this study, I ensured triangulation by incorporating “multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes” into the research (Lather, 1986, p. 67). The patterns were checked across the data sources such as CMC texts, self-report, and interview transcripts. In addition, participant member checking was used to establish validity for the study. The CMC texts, interview transcripts, and a student’ self-report were reviewed multiple times and salient themes were developed. After the data were completely gathered and recursive themes were identified, more theoretical categories were generated based on the data. Besides using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns in the field notes, CMC texts, and interview data, I also used a discourse
analytic method for analyzing the linguistic and discursive means by which situational identities were indexed and constructed in the online writing practice. The discourse analytic approach was particularly informed by the relevant constructs of “positioning” (Davies & Harré, 1990), “epistemic stance” (Ochs, 1996), and “affective stance” (Ochs, 1996). Because the notion of voices is intimately linked with positions in that voices of authority legitimize positions in the social relationships, I used the construct, positionings to analyze online forums. In addition, as the participants were expected to share their own knowledge, feelings, and critiques about the assigned readings with their peers, it is relevant to draw upon epistemic or affective stances in analyzing their voices. Given that identity-in-interaction can be referred to as how one understands one’s relationship to the world, it is also necessary to use affective stance that has to do with an individual’s alignment or non-alignment with others. Therefore, discourse analytic methods allowed me to elucidate how my case student negotiated her voices during online forums.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Silence: A Struggle to be Positioned Legitimately

Blanca’s participation in whole class oral discussions was characterized as almost complete silence. As a learner of English as a foreign language, Blanca never felt comfortable speaking in the oral portion of class. She found it “daunting” to speak in front of a large group of native English speakers. Blanca often assumed that she would “tune out” while speaking in public and that every comment she made would appear pointless. Moreover, she was afraid of “being judged by other classmates” because she felt that her view was too simple and not academic enough. In response to the question about the degree to which she felt the oral discussion mode contributed to her academic learning, Blanca compared it with online forum:

I think that online forum contributed more to my learning process because, in some oral discussions, I “tuned out” or did not have prior knowledge enough to grasp what was being said. Some peers’ contributions were very specific. If you don’t have the same background, you are lost. (Interview, November 7, 2008)

Foreign language anxiety primarily contributed to her silence in oral discussions. It seemed that her lack of self-confidence partly originated from her fear of not meeting the expectations of her classroom community in terms of academic competence. Blanca felt insecure about being positioned as a less competent and unaccountable member of the
classroom community:

Based on my emotions and fears, I don’t feel comfortable participating orally in a classroom. I sometimes felt I was partially involved because some students focused too much on very specific aspects, which limited the flow. In many occasions I felt discussions pertained to very local matters, which is normal because I am in USA. (Self-report, December 9, 2008)

As she put it, due to some students’ dominant voices, Blanca sensed some degree of alienation, taking a relatively peripheral position in the classroom. From her perspective, the oral discussions were not an equally shared medium that is open to all members of the class equally. While keeping silent, she was concerned about being affiliated with a less competent group by failing to present an “academic like” view.

In sum, multiple issues such as communication apprehension, her fear of negative social evaluation, and her sense of alienation kept her silent.

2. Online Forum

Students in online forum were highly encouraged to be active participants and critical thinkers. According to the course syllabus, the instructional goal was that students would develop “a deep understanding of the current state-of-the-art in learning,” thereby experiencing “text as resulting from the socially negotiated transaction between knowledge systems (people).” The instructor began to introduce a CMC component into the advanced graduate seminars to let “silent” students have a chance to “talk” in class discussions: “My purpose at the very beginning was because I had read a literature on how CMC in the classroom changes participation patterns. In my seminars I always tried to encourage everyone to talk” (Teacher Interview, December 18, 2008). In this way, she emphasized students’ active participation in class discussions.

Online writing activities explicitly mediated a particular aspect of academic voices in that they were intended to serve as a situated language practice for real world academic conversations. Blackboard provided an intersubjective site for Blanca to have a sense of contact and community with other participants who had similar or differing sociocultural knowledge of the topics. Blanca’s emerging understanding of her positionality in the classroom seemed indexed by and partly dependent on her experience in online writing activity:

The opportunity of doing this in a written way increased my confidence in expressing my personal views … I was intrinsically motivated to go online to read
my group’s posts and contribute to them. The online forum gave me the opportunity not only to work at my own pace, but also to expand my perspective of the articles …

This kind of sharing with others did contribute to my way of constructing knowledge and making meaning. (Self-report, December 9, 2008, emphasis added)

1) Agency: Voicing Resistance

I found that online forum acted as a site where Blanca could engage in a more critical negotiation of voice that provided evidence of her agency. The online forum allowed readers to become composers of texts that juxtaposed contradictory ideas with the original texts–here, mainly assigned articles. In Excerpts 1 to 3 taken from the second online forum, Blanca’s dialogic exchanges with Kevin 3, a third-year male NS student, revealed the presence of resistance against some of the dominant discourses of power that were identified in written exchanges.

Excerpt 1.
Blanca: I think focusing solely on mathematical knowledge of teachers undermines other very important aspects of teaching. I do agree that ... But because of the levels the authors are focusing this research on (1st and 3rd grade), I do not think that they need an exorbitant knowledge on mathematics. Yet, I do believe some other aspects such as rapport with young children, classroom management, and background on learning disabilities are more important to these grades. […] Relating this research with Bereiter and Scardamalia’s article, I think that some teachers in Hill’s et al article might have infinite knowledge of mathematics and yet obtain the same (or lower) results on students’ achievement than teachers with less mathematic knowledge. In short what I mean is that the amount of knowledge in an area does not make you an expert in it neither a good teacher […] Did anyone have the same feeling?

Blanca positions her turn from the outset as her own opinion by starting out with an epistemic stance marker, “I think.” When she continues, she indicates the levels of participants (“1st and 3rd grade”) in the research as the basis for her claims, while at the same time taking an affective stance in opposition to the authors who made claims for the importance of a teacher's mathematical knowledge. Alternatively, she refers to other key elements of teaching including “rapport with young children, classroom management, and background on learning disabilities” as evidence for her claim that teachers do not need an

3 Kevin in his late 30s belonged to a doctoral program in the department of educational psychology.
excessive mathematical knowledge. Overall Blanca tries to express this opposition and to provide further evidence drawn from the article to counter the authors’ exclusive focus on teacher’s mathematical knowledge. At the end of her turn, Blanca’s question, formulated as open-ended through the use of “anyone,” invites the same position taking by others. Further, the question is couched as personal, with an appeal to emotions (“the same feeling”). As such, it opens up the possibility for other students to respond to the topic at an individual and emotional level, which may put less at stake than a generalized assertion.

In response to Blanca’s question, in Excerpt 2, Kevin begins to establish his affective stance in opposition to Blanca. He immediately expresses his oppositional position with, “I would disagree…” (line 1), although line 9 (“I do agree…”) may point to his concern for potential negative face issues (Brown & Levinson, 1987) involved in opposing Blanca.

Excerpt 2.

Kevin: I would disagree with your analysis of this research. This article is not trying to discount the importance of other key elements of teaching, but is trying to look at one element of effectively teaching math, mathematical knowledge. It is true that a person could have a great knowledge of mathematics, but not have the knowledge or skills of teaching to make them an effective teacher of math. But, that does not mean that mathematical knowledge is not important to teaching math. That would be saying that just because a person has good teaching skills, but very little math knowledge, they would be effective in teaching math to students. […] I do agree that there are other elements to effective teaching, but this research focused on just one component to effective teaching of mathematics.

Once Kevin launches into his argument, he does not explicitly reference Blanca’s comment. Instead, he builds his argument by embedding his claims within meta-discursive comments, suggesting that Blanca is misunderstanding the point of the article, and that his analysis is more accurate. The meta-discourse that goes on here includes such sentences as “this article is not…” (line 2), “It is true that…” (line 4), “That does not mean that…” (line 5), and “that would be saying that…” (line 6), through which he implicitly instructs his group members in how to analyze the topic correctly. In his turn, Kevin references himself just two times, in the beginning in line 1 (“I would…”) and finally in line 9, at the beginning of his concluding claim (“I do agree…”). By using “I would,” Kevin marks the claim that follows as his opinion, serving to weaken the degree of certainty of that claim as compared to a somewhat stronger claim that would be represented as an unmitigated factual statement. However, through his reference to Blanca’s point at the outset of his turn, and by implication throughout the rest of his turn, Kevin marks his affective stance toward her as an oppositional one. He is positioning her in a relatively novice role in relation to
the locus of power in this discourse, while he positions himself in opposition to her as a relatively more expert analyst.

As is shown in the above excerpts, situational identities are invoked in the course of ongoing interaction when a newcomer in an academic discourse negotiates his/her voice regarding the domain-specific topic. Interestingly, Blanca does not ratify Kevin's voice, thereby stopping any further progression of the discursive local construction of a novice identity:

Excerpt 3.

Blanca: I hadn’t pictured it that way. I thought of “problem reduction” in terms of people who already have a lot of knowledge in a field and do not want to put an extra effort in becoming a true expert. Yet, what you say is so true; many people that don’t truly understand a subject will simply reduce the complexity of it and it is shocking to have these methods taught to novices.

It is true that teachers that cannot transmit the “concept” truncate knowledge.

Yet nowadays I think differently, now that I am engaged in a particular field of study, there are some areas where I content myself with just understanding the process. In my perspective at certain point shortcuts are very useful in order to have more free space to pay attention to what is really important to me.

In Excerpt 3, Blanca begins her turn by expressing her disagreement with Kevin: “I hadn’t pictured …” (line 1). Appealing to a general phenomenon such as a “problem reduction” often observed in a certain group of people, Blanca justifies her position (lines 1-3). Meanwhile, Blanca shows, in part, a certain degree of alignment with Kevin's stance: “what you say is so true” (line 3). By enacting a subtle dichotomy between her voice and Kevin's voice (via the conjunction “yet”) and by aligning herself to both, she marks her dual position, simultaneously indexing her familiarity with the idea of “problem reduction” and her appreciation of the intellectual idea expressed by Kevin. Interestingly, she tries to establish the credibility of her expertise by drawing on her recent experience, as evidenced in lines 7 to 9 (“I think differently, now that…” “shortcuts are very useful”). By so doing, Blanca dismisses Kevin's comments. An interview with her implicitly affirmed Blanca’s desire to counteract Kevin's attempt to affiliate her with a novice identity:

Because I wrote my perspective and Kevin wrote his, we didn't particularly agree our posts. I tried to just give another perspective. By doing that, that's how I feel that these online discussions should work, you listen to your peer's idea and you can construct or you can deviate from it as you . . . (Interview, November 7, 2008)
Blanca’s emerging understanding of the culture of CMC writing is indexed by the comments, “you listen to your peer’s idea and you can construct or you can deviate from it.” In line with the view of a human agent as both subject of and subject to relations of power, Blanca seemed to be critically evaluating Kevin’s posting that had framed her position as relatively peripheral in the discussion, and resisting it according to the goal she wished to bring about.

2) Intersubjectivity: Voicing Shared Stances

In participating in composing interpretive texts, students jointly constructed shared perspectives that moved beyond each of their own individual perspectives. Defining this shared agreement involves what Habermas (1998) termed *intersubjectivity*, mutual understanding created in social contexts as a main component of dialogism. The co-constructed interthinking process in which students engaged was a part of establishing and maintaining intersubjectivity, with its emphasis on collectivity and dialogue. While discussing the interplay of aspirations, enjoyment, and work habits during the first online session, Blanca developed a shared stance with other students:

Excerpt 4.

Blanca: It is clear to me that students feel intimidated by the fact of being graded or judged by what we say, write or our performance in a test. Our culture emphasizes on the importance of these results and actually judges our “intelligence” based on this... I think that the only way to encourage students to work is by making them focus more on the process to achieve the goal, not the goal. I wonder if there could be a functional scholar system not based on tests. How could students reflect their knowledge?

Excerpt 4 illustrates how Blanca speculates about the negative sides of the current grading system that might cause students' low motivation, such as students who are “becoming performance-avoidant.” She then presents an alternative approach to raise students' motivation, “making them focus more on the process, not the goal.” Finally, Blanca offers a hands-on exploration, whether one could come up with “a functional scholar system not based on tests” that would allow students to reflect on their own work. By framing her reaction to the article with a question at the end of her turn, she is inviting other students mutually to consider ambivalences within her idea that diverges so radically from the present institutional system. Blanca's question evokes an American student’s alignment with her stance.
Excerpt 5.
Lisa: I think you are right on about the grading system. I did a little research project with my students when I was getting my masters. … But I do feel like my students felt comfortable to try new things, challenge themselves, and think outside the box, because they weren’t fearful of their grades. I love your idea of doing away with tests for a more functional scholar system that really allowed students to reflect on their own work and growth.

Lisa⁴ ratifies Blanca’s posting by saying, “you are right on about …” For the rest of her turn, Lisa offers reasons for her ratification of Blanca’s ideas by reflecting on her research project experience. At the end of her turn, again she strongly affirms her agreement with Blanca’s stance by saying, “I love your idea.”

Excerpt 6.
Blanca: That sounds so interesting! How old were your students? How did you know if they were actually challenging themselves? … I am from Mexico, and a problem we encounter there is that teachers are not sufficiently trained thus this kind of system you mentioned would only be possible in very few schools. … Coming back to your research project, do you think that a subject like mathematics (that is likely to occasion stress in many students) could be graded that way?

In the above excerpt, Blanca validates Lisa’s comments by saying, “so interesting!” and asking for specific information about Lisa’s research experience, encouraging her to report more details. In doing so, she also aligns herself with Lisa’s educational interests as a teacher. Given the developing affective bond between the two, Blanca is open to sharing with Lisa her concern about an education issue in her mother country. At the end of her turn, Blanca poses a question that invites Lisa’s reaction and further critical engagement about the alternative grading system (“do you think that a subject like math could be graded that way?”). Blanca’s question allows Lisa to re-examine the relevance of the grading system in different contexts (speech and debate class, mathematics class) and to come up with a synthesis of institutional artifact (rubrics) and transformative grading as shown below:

Excerpt 7.
Lisa: My students were high schoolers in a speech and debate class. … I can see your

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⁴ Lisa, a 31-year-old woman, was teaching at a high school when she took this course. She was pursuing her first master’s degree in an area of educational psychology.
point that it would be difficult in a mathematics class. But I think using rubrics of some sort could help stimulate this kind of grading. It was definitely a learning experience for me and I didn’t get it right most of the time, but my students knew that we were learning in this process together.

In summary, Blanca and other students were acting and reacting to one another’s postings by adopting certain stances that constituted their social relationships within a locally situated literacy event within their own social histories (Bloome & Bailey, 1992). At the same time, their participation in this written communication relied on their display of knowledge about the disciplinary topic under discussion. Playing out epistemic roles enacted in written exchanges, intertextual links provided participants opportunities to bring up their interpretations of texts, allowing meanings and language that were open to further exploration.

V. DISCUSSION

This case study describes how an ESL student constructed her voice in English with online group of peers. Using the constructs of identity-in-interaction, epistemic/affective stance, and positioning, this study attempted to understand how voice as sociocultural point of view is developed through dialogic interactions with others. The findings compel us as writing practitioners and researchers to reconsider the importance of voice in the process of learning to write in a second language. I suggest that Blanca’s reading of the materials was a mediated process, occurring initially as an individual reading and consummated in small-group productions of online interpretations that represented her understanding of the author’s stance and her alignments. I view this dialogic interaction as an effort to compose a meaning for the disciplinary texts through a collective thinking process.

Particular attention was devoted to two prominent meaning-making procedures in online writing practices: voicing as resistant agency and voicing as intersubjective stances. My analysis demonstrated that these two procedures rest on a reader’s construction of an understanding of an author’s intended meaning of a particular textual message. This construction of meaning necessarily involved the infiltration of other voices, opening the possibility that a message’s authority will be challenged and its meaning refracted in different ways (Bakhtin, 1981).

Also my observation revealed that the discussion of disciplinary topics often included many intertextual references to students’ personal narratives that engaged others differently from other kinds of content and texts, and made the ongoing discussion inherently
dynamic and far-reaching. Blanca engaged in meaning-making practices that went beyond the boundaries of a single text and its authorial voice. It can be argued that online forum played out as a culturally mediated tool for exercising individual agencies and negotiating subjectivities as well.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

My primary intention in this study has been to contribute to discussions of voice in English writing instruction by examining how an ESL student enter into the disciplinary writing equation and by exploring ways in which the term, voice, can be used to analyze the student’s construction in disciplinary identity.

First, the findings suggest that the nature of voice is captured as an activity, as a process, not as a fixed product to be measured in a piece of writing. The dialogical process of voicing characterizes Blanca’s experience with English disciplinary voice. While Blanca was “voicing” in online written exchanges, she came to voice. An emphasis on voicing is useful in showing L2 student writers that what they are expected to do is not to write down a previously acquired voice, but instead to continue their experience or process of voicing by engaging voice as it is represented within their discourse community.

Second, gaining a deeper level of understanding of students’ voice-related experiences and problems by drawing on various constructions of voice (i.e., identity, positioning, and stances), to analyze student’s writing, will enrich academic writing literature and develop fundamental grounds for teaching of voice. By focusing on the voice-related experiences of an ESL graduate student who was entering graduate study in an English-medium setting, I tried to draw attention to voice-related situations, which occur in CMC in university settings. Far from voiceless in the matter of identity in writing, Blanca was “voicing” as she entered the domain of English disciplinary writing in CMC. This is not to say that other ESL students would experience voice in the same way Blanca did. It is not easy to make a generalization about ESL university students with respect to voice when they bring their diverse backgrounds to the voice issue. I further acknowledge that this study is limited in disciplinary scope, as I have focused on one of school genres, the CMC writing within the field of educational psychology. It is certainly possible that student readers/writers of other genres or in other fields may attend to different discursive and non-discursive features, and construct the author’s voice in different ways. Nevertheless, this study shows how voice plays a role in intertextually related reading and writing process for at least some readers and writers. Voice is a critical aspect of writing and it should be brought into English writing pedagogy via consciousness raising or through the explicit instruction of certain discursive features. Contrary to the view posed by some
writing researchers (see Stapleton, 2002), voice as an element of academic writing warrants further studies.

Third, leading students to a fuller awareness of the repertoire of voices they already own can be a useful point in the context of academic writing. Also English writing instructors need to acquire awareness of those repertoires by highlighting voice as an analytic means. This will sensitize writing instructors to the complexities of the voice equation when encountering it in their own teaching. Such awareness will allow for configuring the elements of the real-world rhetorical situations facing NNS student writers. In addition, there is a need to better define voice-related terms such as identity, self, and positioning. This study showed to some degree how a novice student writer experiences these terms so that we can factor her meaningful experience into future attempts to redefine the notion of voice. This study was framed with Mastuda’s (2001) definition—“the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires”—based on my belief that there is a growing need to better understand the social voices and identities of student writers we teach as well as the process of voicing they may undergo. In addition, shifting the discussion of voice from the sole sphere of the individual writer to the dialogically constructed reader-writer interaction offers more in-depth view into the readers’ role in the process of constructing voice.

Finally, it is valuable to think that the development of voice is one dimension of the complexity of discourse acquisition. As student writers are inducted into disciplinary ways of doing, they should raise their critical awareness of expectations that their audiences bring to a text. ESL writers need to make deliberate textual choices in the extent to which they conform or deviate from standards and how they choose to do so. Thus, future research is warranted to examine L2 writers developing a personal repertoire of discursive features and strategies in English as an academic language.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Background Questionnaire

1. Name
2. Date of Birth
3. Sex
4. Current major/department
5. What is your native language?
6. Where is your home country?
7. When did you start your study in the U.S.?
8. How long have you studied in the major in your graduate program?
9. What are your fields of interests within your major?
10. List your work experiences related to your academic field of interest and how long you held these jobs.
11. What is the reason for taking this course?
12. List any courses with computer-mediated communication (CMC) that you have taken.

APPENDIX B
Sample Interview Questions

1. What’s your general feeling or idea about participating in this particular online forum?
2. What do you think of other classmates’ responses to your postings? Are those responses more or less helpful in reflecting on the assigned reading articles?
3. Have you perceived any difficulty in participating in the online forums as a nonnative speaker? If so, what were those?
4. Whom were you thinking as your potential audience as you responded to this specific thread?
5. What made you choose this particular rhetorical expression? How did it work out with your peer reader? (i.e., Were you trying to show your knowledge with this particular predicate, hedge, or adjective?)
6. For which specific message did you feel particularly confident or independent in your learning? Why?

Applicable levels: Tertiary education
Key words: voice, identity, academic writing, electronic discourse
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