

Discussing Voice in Writing and its Importance in Second Language Writing

Jieyun Yang

University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom

Abstract

People rely on their voices to convey the words they want to express in daily life. At this time, voice is considered to be dynamic. However, voice can also exist in a static form. Static 'voice' is regarded as a professional term in writing. An increasing number of articles are being written around the concept of voice. However, different scholars define sound differently. Voice refers to the author's attitude and self-consciousness in writing. The authors define sound mainly from two different ideologies of individualism and collectivism, but these two views on voice are compatible. Different cultures may lead to a different voice, and the same cultures will result in a different voice because of individual differences. In many English-speaking countries and communities, voice has long been recognised as a crucial feature of good writing. Second language (L2) writers need to focus on voice. This paper takes three perspectives to discuss the importance of voice for L2. Therefore, this paper focuses on the voice in writing and why many authors consider it important.

Keywords

Voice in Writing; Academic Writing; Second Language Writers.

1. Introduction

When we talk about 'voice', the first thing that comes to many people's minds is the sound produced from the throat. However, when the voice appears in written material such as books, articles and headlines, it seems to be different from what we normally associate with voice. When voice is discussed in writing, it is used as a professional term to refer to the narrator or writer's attitude, identity, and point of view. Voice has attracted scholarly interest in writing research for a long time, and a growing number of articles have been discussing and carrying out the investigations of voice. However, different scholars have defined voice differently, and their research has elicited many perspectives regarding voice from two different perspectives: individualistic and collectivistic. Nowadays, researchers are investigating voice, teachers are trying to 'teach voice', and L2 writers are trying to demonstrate their voice in writing. This article will be divided into two sections to discuss the voice in writing, including its concepts and its importance. The first part will discuss the definition of voice and the views presented by different authors, while the second part will focus on the importance of voice from the perspective of second language writers and English teachers.

2. What is 'Voice' in Writing?

Different from the precise effect of the voice in speaking, the voice seems more complex in writing. In speaking, people can judge the information conveyed from others or distinguish one from another according to different voices. One of the distinguishing features of writing is that it does not contain the phonetic and prosodic aspects of the authors' identities (Ivanic and Camps, 2001). Consequently, the voice conveyed by people in writing is challenging to be identified. However, it is not the case that voice does not exist in writing. Different theoretical

positions and research provide different definitions of what voice means in writing. This section will describe the definitions of voice by different authors and link different conceptual views with the definitions.

3. Definitions of Voice

Voice is hard to be defined. It remains in some controversy due to the Polysemy of voice (Tardy, 2012). Many scholars do not provide the definitions of 'voice' similarly. They describe the term 'voice' based on their own experience and knowledge. In 1978, Macrorie discussed the concepts of voice and style together. He regards that "if one means by style, the voice, the irreducible and always recognizable and alive thing, then of course style is really everything " (Macrorie, 1978, p.161). However, Macrorie does not give a clear relationship between voice and style. It is doubtful whether the voice is synonymous with style in his definition or one of the subordinate meanings of style. Subsequently, Murray (2004) firstly proposed his definition of voice in 1979. He argued that the individual voice could be regarded as a significant symbol to distinguish the writing. In this article, Murray focuses on how the author's voice serves as an important factor in distinguishing memorable articles from good ones. In 1984, Murray added a further explanation of the individual voice. He notes that voice is the author's view of the subject related to the author's personality and sincerity. Elbow (1981) describes voice as "capture[s] the sound of the individual on the page " (p. 287), which deem as a reflection of Self-representation in writing. Later, Elbow (1999) regarded it as a "metaphor for the ideal of individualism" which associates with the ideology of individualism (p. 334). Interestingly, Bowden introduced a similar concept with Macrorie in 1995, where Bowden argued that voice would stand for the author's style (Bowden, 1995). He believes that the author can utilize his writing style to convey and reflect his voice. Following this, Bowden agreed with the definition of voice with Murray and Elbow's views. He proposed that voice is the expression of the author's inner self with authentic and unified (Bowden, 1999). Stewart (1992) also agrees that writers use their own voice in writing to express their individuality, and the presence of this individuality determines the quality of the writing. But it is undeniable that both their definitions base their discussions on the author as a separate individual. Different authors will convey varying voices because of their different individuality. It seems that the voices between different authors are unique and do not have commonalities. In 2001, Matsuda came up with a new definition of voice. Instead of limiting voice to Self-representation, she linked the term 'voice' to collectivism. Matsuda (2001) pointing out that "voice is not necessarily tied to the ideology of individualism" (p. 36) but is used intentionally or unintentionally in writing through an ever-changing social environment. With the emergence of different definitions of voice, scholars have developed different views of voice basing on their research.

4. Voice in Different Views

The growing awareness among scholars is that voice in writing is not only a statement of individuality but also the reflections of social relations around it. According to the voice's definition based on individualism and collectivism, the views of voice are divided into two main categories: the voice of individual achievement and the voice of social or cultural construction. These two views of voice are mutually compatible.

5. Voice as a Self-representation

From an individualist standpoint, voice is a statement of the identity associated with the individual's representation. Hyland (2002) argues that "writing always has voice in the sense that it conveys a representation of a writer" (p. 355). In this view, voice can be demonstrated

in two aspects: ownership and individual identity. Firstly, when the voice metaphor as ownership, the author controls the process of their writing and the text (Lensmire, 1998). In this metaphor, the author decides how to express ideas by utilizing their own voice in their writing. For example, due to the individual differences, when two authors are writing in the same genre, their text-producing process is entirely different. They have the right to decide how to create their voices according to different topics and positions. Second, voice will reflect the individual identity. Through the author's voice, it is possible to capture who the author is and what they stand for. On the one hand, the voice in writing as Self-representation is achieved through the use of syntax and punctuation (Sperling and Appleman, 2011). When two authors express the same content, the information conveyed through their voices may be different. For example, readers can perceive a different voice in the punctuation used by authors when they express their reluctance to do something. The writer A writes down the sentence like '*No! I Don't want to do that!*'. In this sentence, the reader can feel the author's angry voice and his strongly resistant stance delivered through the written text. In contrast, writer B utilize the ellipsis to materialize his voice, like '*No...I Do not want to do that...*'. Readers are possible to capture that writer B's attitude is different from writer A's. After reading the sentence created by writer B, readers will get the information that writer B is still hesitant whether to reject or not and perhaps he will eventually compromise. On the other hand, the author's voice reveals some information about who he is. Hyland (2002) produces a research about using the pronouns I, me, my, we, us, and our in 240 published journal articles from eight academic disciplines. The research shows that the use of pronouns is different between the eight disciplines. Specifically, writers work in the hard sciences and engineering area focusing on the issue under study. They prefer to use the plural forms in those disciplines instead of the pronouns. Authors from the humanities and social sciences disciplines are likely to use pronouns to strengthen their voices in writing. Because they regard this kind of writing function could establish a credible scholarly identity. As a reader, he can make predictions about the author's working field based on the author's voice during reading. Therefore, it is clear that authors express their individual voices by using different linguistic features in their writing.

6. Voice as Social/Cultural Construction

While some theorists emphasize the voice as a Self-representation, others highlight those social and cultural elements that inevitably influence the voice. The discussion of voice as a socially or culturally mediated phenomenon was first initiated by Bakhtin (1986). In his opinion, any expression is in response to a previous view and with the prediction of a future standpoint. The process of writing is a kind of social behaviour because the author expresses his voice in response to the voice of other authors. For instance, authors frequently link to the voices of previous scholars when conveying their own voice in academic writing. In this case, the author's utterance is no limit to one voice while perhaps sum up the voice of others and then put forward their own voice. Thus, writers can use multiple voices in their writing while voices correspond to each other. Besides, voice is also associated with cultural background (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Second language scholars have questioned the concept of sound as a feature of individualism, and they work to investigate whether different cultural backgrounds impact the way authors shape their voices. Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) systematically analyze ten textbooks widely used by first-year students in the United States related to concepts of voice. The authors argue that the concepts of voice proposed in these textbooks are based on hypothetical questions. However, these hypotheses may be complex for second language learners to understand because they lack the cultural background required to access them. Another research also finds that the conception of voice from American writers is incompatible with Chinese writers who use English as a foreign language to write (Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999). The authors consider that a strong voice in Chinese culture may violate unified

social and cultural norms. Ji (2011) similarly connects Chinese students' challenges in English writing to the Chinese social and cultural background. Due to the exam-oriented education, high school students in China lack ownership and identity in English writing. Chinese learners use writing guidance and writing textbooks as examples to create their work. Students must pay attention to grammar, so English learning focuses on following pattern practice and producing error-free text instead of expressing their ideas through individual voice. Consequently, it is difficult for students to capture concepts related to voice in Chinese social and cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, in the process of writing as a collaborative behaviour between self and collectivity, the voice is both including individual and societal elements simultaneously. Prior (2001) concludes that the voice is inevitably influenced by individualistic ideology, working as an essential means of Self-representation, and also cannot be isolated from the social environment. Therefore, when discussing an author's voice, it could not be limited to the writer's own individual identity and ownership but also closely connected to the cultural background in his or her own social environment.

7. Why is Voice Considered Important?

In many English-speaking countries and communities, voice has been regarded as the critical feature of successful writing. For writers of English as the first language, voice is imperceptible in writing which they consciously or unconsciously acquire in the social environment. However, most non-native English speakers are unfamiliar with the notion of voice (Zhao, 2014). Thus, it is essential for second language writers to pay attention to the presence of voice in writing. The following part will discuss the importance of voice from three aspects: L2 writers in social and cultural environment, L2 writers' Self-representation and English teachers' teaching content.

For second language writers, voice is the crucial element in their writing. Without understanding the voice in the second language, writers will encounter the challenge in their writing. In countries where English is the second or foreign language, writers have formed their first language voice through the influence of their society and culture. However, when they switch from writing in their first language to writing in a second language, their mindset, cultural differences, and limited knowledge of the second language can be obstacles to their clear writing (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996). It means that voice plays a crucial role for L2 writers in switching between first and second language writing. The pronoun 'I' is widely used in writing for American writers, including creative writing and academic writing. They consider using the pronoun 'I' in writing to express Self-representation and reflect their uniqueness as individuals. However, plenty of research has shown that this kind of writing style is rare for L2 writers. Writers who are not native English speakers do not use the pronoun 'I' as a tool to convey their voice when writing in their native language. They do not switch their voice from first language writing to second language writing. Because influencing their cultural background, the writers of collectivist culture are generally not as confident as the writers of individualism culture (Wu and Rubin, 2000). This misunderstanding causes that their voice in L2 may not appear as clearly as in L1 writing. For example, Ivanic and Camps (2001) based their discussion on data from the six Mexican students studying at a British university. It is no surprise that these six students will avoid using the first person in academic writing. The reason is that they are taught to reduce the use of the first person in academic writing while possible to stay away from the object they described during their previous learning experience. This kind of instruction also appears in the Turkish students' writing experience. One research focusing on comparing writing texts from Turkish and American students mentions that most Turkish learners regarded the use of I will cause their academic writing to seem less formal (Çandarlı et al., 2015). The result is that American students utilised much more first-person

pronouns than Turkish students in English writing. Specifically, one American student uses the first-person pronoun 'I' 12 times in the same article, but 35 out of the 48 Turkish students did not employ 'I' in their essays. This case also existed in the Turkish essays written by those Turkish participants. Similarly, Lorés-Sanz (2011) compares the use of first-person pronouns in a number of texts written by L1 and L2 writers in English and Spanish. She discovers that the first-person pronoun appears more frequently in texts written by English authors, whereas it is sporadic in texts written by Spanish authors. Thus, when L2 writers face such voice differences, their writing process becomes complicated. In contrast, if L2 writers have a clear understanding of the concept of voice, combining the existing voice in the first language with the second language, their writing process will be more straightforward. In Wang's (2011) study, four Chinese students adopted different strategies to build their voice in response to the challenge of academic writing in western universities. Two of them tried to imitate the writing styles of native English writers to create their own voices in a second language in order to integrate into the Western discourse community. During this process, they experienced considerable difficulty and confusion. The other two students chose to show their individual voices. They provided additional explanations of the differences between the voices produced in their first and second languages, which promoted their transition to English academic writing to some extent. The concept of voice supports L2 writers adjust their writing style to meet the needs and expectations of writing in different language backgrounds while reducing the impact caused by the voice of the second language. Thus, understanding the notion of voice is beneficial for L2 writers to reduce the gap between the voice in L1 and L2.

Another important of voice is that it supports the L2 writers to show their Self-representation better. As mentioned above, the essential quality of good writing is showing the individual identity of the writer. Vocal is an important means for authors to convey their point of view, identify themselves, and attract readers. For L2 writers, it is crucial to understand the voice in order to project their Self-representation in writing. In Ivanic and Camps (2001) analyzes the use of voice in L2 academic writing, they identify three different types of writers' positionings: ideational positioning, interpersonal positioning, and textual positioning. Second language writers can draw on these three different positionings to access their identity achievement. Firstly, "ideational positioning" provides L2 writers with guidance to choose the specific lexical in writing. L2 writers can use specific vocabulary and syntax to enable readers to recognize their background, position and ideas. For example, the writer can choose professional terms rather than the common expression in writing to convey that he is a writer in a particular field. When an author uses vocabulary like phonology, morphology, and syntax rather than simply using the word 'grammar', they are closer to the culture of people focusing on the linguistic field. Secondly, "interpersonal positioning" is helpful for L2 writers to show their authority and certainty through a strong voice. This positioning hints that the writers could utilize several methods to reflect their voice, including self-mention, using hedges, intensifier, and tense. On the one hand, the use of the first-person pronoun mentioned earlier is an example of emphasizing presence by explicitly mentioning oneself. The first-person pronoun assists the author in indicating that he or she has chosen a different research approach or perspective, highlighting the credibility and uniqueness of the research perspective and findings. It facilitates the author to indicate that he is the opinion holder (Tang and John, 1999). The author links himself with his findings, thus emphasizing his contribution in his working area. Meanwhile, this kind of writing function keeps the writer everywhere in the writing while drawing the reader's attention to the author's view. On the other hand, hedges and intensifiers reveal the author's confidence in the written content. The hedges represent the writer's attitude of what he talked about. The writer's uncertain attitude mainly through modal verbs (may, might) and adjectives or adverbs indicating degrees of uncertainty (possible, probable, possibly, probably). In contrast, the use of intensifier, such as believe, show, demonstrate, can highlight

the writer's certainty of view and project the author as a high professional investigator in his research area. Thirdly, "textual positioning" refers to the author's preference for a particular communicative pattern. In Ivanic and Camps (2001)' s investigation, the L2 writers are suggested to sound "imbued-with-academic-literacy" with the tendency to use embedded clauses to express their ideas (p.26). Alternatively, authors can utilise visual and verbal modes, such as diagrams or models, to mark what kind of communication mode they prefer to write in. Thus, voice supports the writer in finding the right way to present themselves through different positioning. It helps to emphasise the uniqueness of the author's perspective, identity and findings on a topic while increasing their academic proficiency.

Voice is the key aspect of English teaching. In countries such as the United States, voice is considered an essential concept in various writing textbooks, writing courses, and even writing assessments at different educational levels (Dipardo et al., 2011). For example, a review of the existing ELA state standards in the United States shows that 41 out of 50 states discussed the concept of voice and expected students to convey their voice (Zhao and Llosa, 2008). In Canada, students are fewer experience challenges with issues of voice, as they have English writing courses relating to voice to strengthen their academic writing skills (Que and Li, 2015). Voice is already present in language teaching and assessment in the English-speaking community. Due to globalization, English as a medium of instruction in global education is increasing, and more and more students are learning to write academic articles in English (Jenkins, 2013). However, as mentioned earlier, many L2 writers experience difficulties in writing due to a lack of awareness of the L2 voice. Without a voice appreciated by the English-speaking community, it is difficult for second language learners to create the expected text works. Therefore, a growing number of scholars believe that it is necessary to highlight the concept of voice in English language teaching. English teachers can provide L2 students with explicit guidance to adapt voice in their writing. For example, teachers can guide students to predict how their target audience will respond to their writing (Kirby et al., 2004). This activity could relate to the concept of voice through Bakhtin's view, in which writers react to previous utterances and predict future ones (Bakhtin, 1986). At the same time, the notion of voice can increase students' critical awareness in order to avoid academic plagiarism. L2 Students are possible to show Self-representation better through writing instruction, controlling their ownership and identity in their writing. When responding to previous utterances, the L2 students can critically create their voices to form utterances with their own identity rather than limited to copy or summarize others ' voices. Therefore, teaching the concept of voice in writing enables students to present a critical and unique standpoint. Besides, research about the pedagogy of voice warns English teachers against unnecessary stereotypes in teaching (Canagarajah, 2015). It is easy for teachers of English, especially those for whom English is a first language, to make assumptions related to student's cultural background, which can have a negative impact on teaching. For example, assuming that students must not understand a particular point of view or conception in writing because of their different cultural backgrounds. This kind of stereotype may hinder students from accessing their voice in writing.

In summary, it is crucial for people who speak English as a second language to value voice in the writing process. Adequate understanding of voice may support L2 writers to quickly construct their voice to further work as an English writer and inform English teachers' classroom practice.

8. Conclusion

The article illustrates the different definitions and opinions towards voice based on current writing research while discussing its importance in writing. Voice has been defined and explained in various ways depending on different ideologies in the writing literature. Some

scholars consider that writers' personalities influence how they write. Thus, the voice is unique and represents their different identities. In contrast, others regard that writing is affected by the environment, such as society and culture. They argue that voice is the result of the co-construction of the author and his background. However, this view is often discussed in combination, especially when discussing the importance of voice. Firstly, from the social and cultural aspect, lacking the concept of voice in L2 may cause L2 writers to face challenges in writing. They need to adapt the voice already developed in the L1 background to meet the different voices in L2. Secondly, different positionings can help L2 writers to construct their voice and better present Self-representation. Thirdly, the concept of voice has been concerning in the English community but is less mentioned in the L2 community. Emphasising the concept of voice in teaching is beneficial for L2 students to construct a voice recognised by the English-speaking community. To conclude, voice exists in varying forms in different cultures, while individual differences arise within the same cultural background. In this process, teachers can guide the transformation of the L2 writer's voice to produce excellent writing.

References

- [1] Bakhtin, M., 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- [2] Bowden, D., 1995. The rise of a metaphor: "Voice"; in composition pedagogy. *Rhetoric Review*, 14(1), pp.173-188.
- [3] Bowden, D., 1999. *The mythology of voice*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- [4] Canagarajah, A., 2015. "Blessed in my own way:" Pedagogical affordances for dialogical voice construction in multilingual student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 27, pp.122-139.
- [5] Çandarlı, D., Bayyurt, Y. and Martı, L., 2015. Authorial presence in L1 and L2 novice academic writing: Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 20, pp.192-202.
- [6] DiPardo, A., Storms, B. and Selland, M., 2011. Seeing voices: Assessing writerly stance in the NWP Analytic Writing Continuum. *Assessing Writing*, 16(3), pp.170-188.
- [7] Elbow, P., 1981. *Writing with power*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.287.
- [8] Elbow, P., 1999. Individualism and the teaching of writing: Response to Vai Ramanathan and Dwight Atkinson. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(3), p.334.
- [9] Hyland, K., 2002. Options of identity in academic writing. *ELT Journal*, 56(4).
- [10] Kirby, D., Kirby, D.L., & Liner, T., 2004. *Inside out: Strategies for teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- [11] Lensmire, T., 1998. Rewriting student voice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30(3), pp.261-291.
- [12] Lorés-Sanz, R., 2011. The construction of the author's voice in academic writing: the interplay of cultural and disciplinary factors. *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies*, 31(2), pp.173-193.
- [13] Ivanič, R. and Camps, D., 2001. I am how I sound: Voice as Self-representation in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10(1-2), pp.3-33.
- [14] Ji, K., 2011. The Influence of Chinese Rhetorical Patterns on EFL Writing: Learner Attitudes Towards This Influence. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 34(1).
- [15] Macrorie, K., 1978. *Te1ling writing*. New Jersey: Haynon Book Co.
- [16] Matsuda, P., 2001. Voice in Japanese written discourse. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10(1-2), pp.35-53.
- [17] Murray, D. M., 2014. The maker's eye: Revising your own manuscripts. *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*, 610-14.
- [18] Murray, D. M., 1999. *Write to learn*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- [19] Prior, P., 2001. Voices in text, mind, and society. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10(1-2), pp.55-81.

- [20] Que, H., & Li, X., 2015. Voices of Chinese Post-80s Students in English Academic Writing. *TESL-EJ*, 19(3), p.3.
- [21] Ramanathan, V. and Atkinson, D., 1999. Individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(1), pp.45-75.
- [22] Ramanathan, V. and Kaplan, R., 1996. Audience and voice in current L1 composition texts: Some implications for ESL student writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 5(1), pp.21-34.
- [23] Sperling, M. and Appleman, D., 2011. Voice in the Context of Literacy Studies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(1), pp.70-84.
- [24] Stewart, D., 1992. Cognitive Psychologists, Social Constructionists, and Three Nineteenth-Century Advocates of Authentic Voice. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 12(2), 279-290.
- [25] Tang, R. and John, S., 1999. The 'I' in identity: Exploring writer identity in student academic writing through the first person pronoun. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18, pp.S23-S39.
- [26] Tardy, C., 2012. Current Conceptions of Voice. *Stance and Voice in Written Academic Genres*, pp.34-48.
- [27] Wang, M., 2011. Chapter 3: Chinese Postgraduate Students Learning to Write in English: Toward an Understanding of L2 Academic Writing. *Voices, Identities, Negotiations, and Conflicts: Writing Academic English Across Cultures*, pp.41-58.
- [28] Wu, S., & Rubin, D., 2000. Evaluating the Impact of Collectivism and Individualism on Argumentative Writing by Chinese and North American College Students. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 35 (2), 148-178.
- [29] Zhao, C., 2014. Authorial Voice in Second Language Writing. *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, pp. 1-6.
- [30] Zhao, C. and Llosa, L., 2008. Voice in high-stakes L1 academic writing assessment: Implications for L2 writing instruction. *Assessing Writing*, 13(3), pp.153-170.