14 Academic Writing and Student Agency

Virginia Zavala

In this paper, I discuss the notion of agency and its place (and importance) within a sociocultural and critical view of literacy, and of academic literacy specifically. In the first part, I frame the problem of academic literacy within a critical paradigm that has been adopted by diverse disciplines and that has recently influenced applied linguistics. I also explain the connection between the new literacy studies and a theory of situated learning as participation in communities of practice. In the second part, I present two brief case studies about Quechua-speaking students from Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga (Ayacucho, Peru) in order to show the strategies that they develop in the process of appropriating academic literacy (specifically writing) and as part of a display of agency. These case studies show that individuals do not constitute mere effects of their "cultural characteristics," but that they are actors in the world, who participate in communities of practice and who often negotiate with institutional expectations. Finally, I end with a more applied discussion about the teaching of academic literacy and with an argument in favor of a negotiation model that questions the neoliberal sociolinguistic view which is still prevailing in our field.

The goal of this paper is to introduce the notion of *agency* in academic literacy and argue that this concept should occupy a central place in this type of writing. Agency has become a ubiquitous construct in several disciplines, but it is sometimes fuzzy. In general, it refers to individuals' socioculturally mediated ability to act and choose within the framework of the effects of the ideological forces that have shaped their subjectivity (Ahearn, 2001; Ashcroft et al., 2000). This definition emphasizes the social nature of agency and distances itself from more cognitive perspectives that highlight autonomous individuals' freely exerted volition (Ahearn, 2001). From a theory of practice, which sees agency and structure as mutually constitutive (Bourdieu, 1977), subjects are neither totally free to choose nor completely constrained by structural variables. Rather, under certain circumstances, they can act in ways that transgress

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/INT-B.2025.2739.2.14

the social structures that influence and constrain them. This phenomenon is apparent in social class and gender, but also in literacy practices.

In the first section, I will frame this issue regarding this type of literacy within a critical paradigm that has been influential in other disciplines, such as applied linguistics. In the second section, I present two short case studies focused on students at Universidad de Huamanga at Ayacucho, Peru, who are native speakers of Quechua. My goal is to show that the strategies they develop in the process of appropriating academic literacy (specifically, writing) constitute deployments of their agency. These case studies reveal that the participants are not mere effects of their "cultural features." Instead, they are agentive actors in the world, that they participate in communities of practice, and that many times they resist institutional expectations.

Connecting Paradigms and Concepts

When we find an essay that differs from the "typical" academic essay and, moreover, is written by a student who speaks a minority language, we tend to associate these differences with the possible interference between the student's first and second language. These interferences may occur at the grammatical level but also at the rhetorical or discursive level.

Since the 1960s, contrastive rhetoric has emphasized cultural variation and negative transfer from the first language in the academic writing of students who speak English as a second language (Connor, 1996). On the one hand, this perspective has assumed that each language has its own rhetorical conventions that stem from culture-specific thought patterns. On the other hand, it has been established that the rhetorical conventions of the students' first languages interfere with or are negatively transferred to their second language academic writing. For example, while standard English is said to promote linearity, deductive logic, critical thinking, individuality, clarity, and reason, other languages are supposed to display alternate rhetorical patterns different from those of English (Kubota, 2010).

This perspective assumes an equivalence between *learning styles* and *ethnic groups*, as in "Asians have a deductive style" or "Americans have an inductive style." This focus on "cultural traits" promotes the idea that behavioral patterns derive from an individual's or a group's *essence*, as if they were permanent and static features of the individual or group. This, in turn, obscures the connections between individual learning and the practices of cultural communities because individuals engage in situated, participatory learning within specific practices and such participation changes throughout their lives (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, the relationship between *learning* and *culture* must

not be essentialized; instead, it must be framed within the concept of *practice*, which I will address later.

Moreover, by constructing a dichotomy between English and the "other languages" (which are defined in opposition to English), this perspective implicitly conveys the superiority of the hegemonic language at this historical moment (English) and the inferiority of the rest. In doing so, it reproduces a colonial discourse that exoticizes and "otherizes" the language (and culture) of the "other," meaning the non-English-speaking speaker. Finally, the explicit and mechanical teaching of the conventional rhetorical structure of English attempts to integrate students to the hegemonic academic community. However, recent critical perspectives within contrastive rhetoric have paid more attention to the plurality, complexity and hybridity of a language's rhetorical patterns and have rejected ahistorical, rigid, and reductive definitions of cultural rhetorics (Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

All things considered, these discussions about students who learn English as a second language in English-speaking countries like the US or former British colonies are productive and interesting in attempting to understand the Latin American situation of students who are native speakers of indigenous languages and learn Spanish as a second language.

We now know that many variables can influence a student's writing and cultural rhetorical differences are not at the center stage. Other dimensions to be considered are students' writing experiences in their first language, second language fluency, their experiences writing specific genres in both languages, the instructional approaches they have been exposed to, their beliefs about cultural differences, and their agency as reflected in their rhetorical intentions and preferences. The latter is the focus of this paper.

What follows is a reflection on academic writing, one that is based on theoretical developments that have emerged in several disciplines in the last decades. Postfoundational critiques (e.g., postmodern, poststructuralist and postcolonial) have played a central role in revealing the sociopolitical construction of knowledge and denaturalizing taken-for-granted assumptions that have obscured the issue of power. Within the so-called linguistic turn of the social sciences, a critical applied linguistics approach has developed (Pennycook, 2001); that together with a sociocultural situated view of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), now has renewed notions of learners' "culture," "language," and "agency," and of the role that these categories play in written communication (Canagarajah, 2003; Gutierrez, 2008; Kubota, 2010). This approach sees student writers as agents who negotiate rhetorical norms and their subjectivities as they write in their first and second language, within different communities of practice (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). It is, then, an applied

linguistics that politicizes and problematizes the definitions of *language*, *culture*, *learning*, and *literacy*, among others, in order to shed light on the power dynamics that underlie those definitions and thus seek social transformation.

Now, why are these definitions problematized? Because the postfoundational critiques assume that all knowledge—including any definition—is a social construction based on discursive practices (or in the ways we use language). It follows that any definition of "language" or "culture" has emerged from looking at the world from a certain vantage point and serves specific interests. Knowledge is not based on an objective, neutral observation of the world. Therefore, the categories we use to apprehend reality—such as language, culture, or literacy—do not reference "real" divisions. From this approach, it is important to cast a critical gaze on knowledge that is taken for granted and ask ourselves what power dynamics have contributed to its construction.

Thus, in contrast to viewing a specific language as a self-contained, closed system that is clearly different from other languages, critical sociolinguistics prefers to see language as a practice that is part of a complex network of social activities, where individuals, as social actors, deploy different linguistic resources to achieve concrete purposes in specific situations (Heller, 2007). The ways that, for example, Quechua and Spanish are delimited in relation to each other or the characterization of *quechuañol*[1] as an undesirable language variety are ideologically charged practices that serve oppressors' interest and contribute to perpetuating social inequality.

A similar gaze can be applied to the definition of culture. It must not be assumed that cultural differences exist as tangible, real entities; rather, it must be assumed that they are perpetually negotiated subjective processes that are discursively constructed and influenced by a wide range of power structures. Street (1993) rightly argues that, instead of attempting to define what culture *is*, we should examine what it *does* in order to discover the definitions that are constructed in specific circumstances and to particular ends.

"Othering" processes are just one example of how cultural differences between "us" and "them" are constructed in order to continue reproducing social exclusion. Thus, if we use culturally predefined categories as a basis for our research, we could be reproducing the discourses (or representations) that circulate in society, instead of analyzing them critically (Piller, 2007).

Within this perspective that highlights the social construction of knowledge, a new sociocultural approach to reading and writing has been developed:

1 Translators' note: *Quechuañol* refers to the practice of code-switching between Quechua and Spanish.

the *new literacy studies*. This approach has produced numerous publications in English (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984) and, more recently, in Spanish (Cassany, 2008; Zavala et al., 2004). A line of inquiry within this approach is the study of *academic literacy* that focuses on higher education (Boughey, 2000; Haggis, 2003; Hendricks & Lynn, 2000; Hirst et al., 2004; Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2003; Turner, 2003). This literature, which analyzes ways of constructing knowledge in academia, agrees that academic literacy, traditionally assumed to be a transparent, neutral means to transmit knowledge, is actually no more than a particular way of using language that has been developed within the Western intellectual tradition.

According to Turner (2003), even though academic literacy has existed for a long time, it has cloaked itself in a "discourse of transparency" as it has been widely taken to be the best *vehicle* for the formulation, transmission, and comprehension of academic content in the clearest possible way. We must see that beyond this technical discourse lies an "objectivist" way of constructing knowledge that purports to reflect the product of a "rational" and "scientific" mind attuned to the conventions of the dominant intellectual tradition. The use of impersonal forms instead of the first person or nominalizations instead of active verbs are but two examples of the fact that the conventions of academic literacy are neither natural nor neutral.

Academic literacy is conceived as that which is "understandable by everyone." This confirms the "discourse of transparency" that cloaks this kind of literacy. In previous studies, many Peruvian students have said that academic writing in the university is "formal" and has the following features: "the language is *clear*, precise and concrete," "it uses *clear* and known terms," "everything is *clear* and pertains to reality and there is not subjectivity" and "it is *understandable* by the general population" (Zavala & Córdova, 2010). These ideas "naturalize" the conventions of academic literacy; we know, however, that far from being natural, it is a socially constructed discourse that is not easily accessible by all.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to question and deconstruct academic literacy and hold that it is a historical creation of certain power dynamics. From the perspective of sociocultural studies, literacy is a *social practice*, with social practices understood as "habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 21). *Practice* is a central notion in a theory of literacy because it connects abstract structures and concrete events, or between "society" and people living their lives (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 21). In that sense, practices do not merely reproduce a collection of representations of reality but also construct new representations thanks to

subjects' "agency." As Werstch (1998) reminds us, the unit of analysis of interdisciplinary work in a new social theory is not the mind, the individual or society seen from a macro-perspective, but *social practice* (or activity), where individuals and society meet.

The concept of "practice" is central to sociocultural studies of literacy but also to a theory of situated learning, of which speech and writing are only one part. The theory of social practice (Lave, 1996) has influenced the development of a notion of learning as *participation in communities of practice* and, therefore, as an integral part of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This means that, in any process of learning, as part of situated activities, people develop abilities but also participate as actors in the world and develop identities that make them members of specific communities. Therefore, while engaging in social practices, people make commitments, construct identities, develop social relationships with other members of the community, use specific artifacts, reproduce implicit values within a particular ideological system and, thus, make society and culture. While contrastive rhetoric sees culture as an independent variable or disconnected from the processes that constitute it, a sociocultural perspective sees culture as immersed in activity systems, artifacts, and other types of symbolic forms. Speech and writing are parts of these systems.

This social theory of learning rejects the cognitive vision that construes learning as a mental process detached from other sociocultural dimensions (like identity, social relationships, or artifact manipulation) and as a process that privileges individual cognitive activity or, at best, interaction with one other subject. People learn within practices, not in the sense of mechanical exertion, but in the sense of activities in the world through which identities and memberships in collectives are forged. Subjects are "constituted" and "constitute" themselves in these activities together with others who share goals, interests, commitments, resources, knowledge, and skills. In other words, people become specific kinds of subjects through specific ways of participating in the world.

I would like to highlight that what defines this theory is the type of relationship it posits between the subject and the world. Giddens (1995), a central figure in the debate about the relationship between "agency" and "structure," proposes that people's actions are developed from social structures, which are in turn reinforced or reconfigured by the effects of those very actions. Actors are not totally free agents, nor are they social products completely determined by structures. Under some circumstances, they can transform the systems that produce them. This dialectical approach avoids the risks of overemphasizing the social determination of social practices or assuming the discursive constitution of reality as produced by the free play of ideas in people's minds rather than by real, structurally, and materially grounded social practices. We must then keep

in mind that, within the structures that constrain actors, they can open new social possibilities from the practices in which they engage. As pointed out by Lave and Wenger (1991): "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world" (p. 49).

This discussion leads us to the notion of *agency* and its importance in academic literacy scholarship. Student agency situates them as individuals with diverse competencies, subjectivities and educational experiences who act on writing rather than merely transferring the rhetoric of their first language to their second language. Subjects are not mere effects of their cultural features; rather, they are volitive agents capable of generating social change. When students learn academic literacy, they not only acquire knowledge and complacently accept literate activity. They also act on the world and deploy actions within the framework of the effects of the social structures that have shaped their subjectivities (Ashcroft et al., 2000). From this perspective, agents, activity, and the world are mutually constitutive (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

We are then situated in a new understanding of writing, not as an object but as an activity. Writing is no longer just a (linguistic) product or (cognitive) process, but a situated practice that is social, material, ideological and historical (Canagarajah, 2003). Within this framework, scholars have shifted from examining *texts* as finished products to exploring the *strategies* that students deploy as they appropriate academic writing. Thus, studies of writing in multilingual contexts show that students use several strategies to learn academic writing. These range from the unchallenged adoption of dominant rhetorical conventions to the creation of a "third space" to resolve some of the conflicts produced by the learning of the dominant discourse (see Canagarajah, 2003; Cassany, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2008). The concept of *strategy* is tied to subjects' deployment of agency as they attempt to cope with socially dominant ideological impositions and representations.

Learning academic literacy must then be understood as a process that implies participation in the literate sociocultural practices that define an academic community. However, even though participation is a crucial condition for learning, not every case is equally successful (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Obstacles related to access can arise, as well as others regarding difficulties gaining legitimacy as "new" members in a community of practice. Moreover, sometimes novices' learning is inhibited when instructors (such as professors) act in authoritarian ways and believe that students are to be "taught" rather than being peripheral participants in that community of practice. Indeed, instead of inviting, encouraging, accompanying, and supporting students in integrating into a specific community, many times instructors may be unwillingly excluding students without asking ourselves what is underlying the issue.

Furthermore, the official discourse regarding the reading and writing abilities of university students from linguistic-cultural minorities is often imbued with a deficit discourse that asserts the need for remedial intervention. A deficit discourse is that which judges non-mainstream cultural forms as less adequate, without examining them from the perspective of its own community (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Casting those students as incapable of reading and writing academic texts obscures the agency they deploy as they develop strategies to challenge—either consciously or unconsciously—academic discourse. Some of the judgments about such students are "they can't read," "they don't know how to underline important ideas," "they can't find main and supporting ideas," "they can't systematize information and then communicate what the teacher says," "they don't have any study skills," "they don't have reading habits," "they are unmotivated," "they don't talk or write much," "they can't make inferences," or "they struggle with reading because of their limited vocabulary" (Zavala & Córdova, 2010).

Two Cases

Conducting research from students' perspectives affords a more systematic and detailed observation of the complex strategies they develop as they learn academic writing and the level of agency they deploy during that process. It is not enough to ask whether students can use academic writing, as they may be competent but harbor negative views toward this literate practice. Indeed, many students across several contexts experience internal conflicts as they read and write within academic communities. Instead of reacting passively, they develop strategies to negotiate power, identities, and the sense of belonging that are at play in intercultural communication (Canagarajah, 1997). These are processes of *appropriation* in which young people use certain forms of academic discourse to articulate their own identity (Ashcroft et al., 2000).

In this section, I will present two case studies of young speakers of Quechua who, at the time of the study, were first-year students at Universidad de Huamanga at Ayacucho, Peru. Almost 90% of the population of this region speak Quechua on a daily basis (ENAHO, 2001).

Emilia is a Law student; Félix is a Journalism major. Emilia's family migrated to Huamanga fleeing political violence when she was a child. The fact that she has lived in the city since that early age explains that her command of Quechua is limited despite the fact that she can communicate in that language. By contrast, Félix's family still lives in their rural village despite having been exposed to the same violence, and he is fluent in oral Quechua. Both Emilia's father and Félix's father managed to access higher education,

which is not common among families from rural communities. Emilia's father dropped out of college but was able to complete his degree through a special professionalization program. Félix's father never graduated. Unlike both fathers, the mothers did not complete elementary school. It is important to point out that both Emilia and Félix are thus the first generation of their families that are likely to attain undergraduate degrees.

As we will see, Emilia and Félix's writing are framed within social practices of resistance toward the prototypical ways of "being a college student" imposed by the institution and, at the same time, to construct an alternative identity that is different from what society expects. In Emilia's case, she fights to be accepted for who she is without having to become the person society wants her to be: "There is a loss of a part of yourself in order to be accepted, in order to adapt." Emilia does not want to stop being herself; she wants to be a college student but also wants to "keep eating *yuyo*" (a typical dish from rural areas), "keep speaking Quechua to *mamitas*" (indigenous women), "keep walking around the places I used to walk or keep going to the market with my mom."

In this sense, the students that come from rural areas know that when speaking Spanish with Quechua interferences, when they listen to *huayno* (typical Andean music), or when they dress informally when delivering classroom presentations, they are at risk of being excluded and, moreover, inferiorized because they are performing an identity that does not conform with the social expectations. Besides, being a college student involves reading and writing in a manner that is "academic," that is also connected with everything that was previously mentioned, and associated with a specific way of building knowledge, developing learning, and assuming a sense of belonging to a community with which students do not always feel comfortable.

Emilia and Félix have developed several vernaculars or self-generated writing practices (Ivanic & Moss, 2004) in order to reflect on topics that they are interested in or concerned about in a way that is not allowed by academic writing: in building knowledge "in their own way" in order to project an identity they desire.[2] Emilia uses an "academic journal" each term to write about academic topics that are discussed in her classes: "all those academic topics

2 The sociocultural perspective on reading and writing establishes a distinction between dominant or official literacy practices and self-generated or vernacular literacy practices. The latter refer to reading and writing that are not regulated by formal laws and socially dominant institutional procedures, and that have their origin in daily life (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The dominant or official literacy practices are associated with formal organizations such as education, religion, law, bureaucracy, and work (among others), in the way that they are institutionalized and valued. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that this division between self-generated literacy practices or vernacular and dominant or official is not a rigid one.

about social conflicts, university changes, social reality, I make them personal, and the result is a text that is no longer academic but emotional that expresses that reality and shows mostly what I think about it." She writes about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Amnesty International, politics, conflicts, legal ethics, the usefulness of laws, and other topics pertaining to her degree program. Emilia writes her journal mostly while she is attending lectures or reading in the library. While in the classroom "questions arise and, since I cannot challenge the professor, I challenge the paper sheet." While in the library, questions arise about the texts she reads, and she feels the need to write comments about them.

As for Félix, he writes "monographs in a poetic style" about the story of his father and his community, the political violence of the 1980s, the earthquake that damaged the city of Ica, and other topics. He also writes emails where he analyzes socio-political topics "from a subjective perspective" and personal reflections where he uses literary strategies.

Emilia

As stated by Boughey (2000), composing an academic text is like singing a song with a choir in the background. The need to have these other voices to sing with or against them is a kind of rule in academic knowledge construction. A scholar cannot sing alone because the other voices must provide the evidence for what the scholar is singing. Therefore, an academic text contains multiple voices, "It contains the voices of the authorities that the author cites and it also contains the voice of the author that appears in relation to these other voices as a soloist backed by a choir" (Boughey, 2000, p. 283). Understanding this interplay of voices is a lengthy process that involves "scholarly" ways of knowing and examining the world, ways that might be in conflict with some people's way of building knowledge.

In Emilia's case, there is a tension between the evidence she values and that is valued by the academic community. While scholars consider reliable sources to be those found in the literature, for Emilia—and many of her fellow students—reliable sources to build knowledge are found in their lived experiences or "what they have seen with their own eyes." As Emilia puts it "the professor relied on what the law stated, while I was relying on what I had seen. So, I feel that's where the emotional aspect comes in, and I wasn't basing my argument on what the professor said about the laws." Canagarajah (1997) found evidence of the same practice among African American students, for whom the best evidence for knowledge building was in rap, movies, TV shows, and other pop culture sources.

While in a scholarly text the author builds knowledge on the basis of sources from the literature, articulating their voice with those of the authors they cite, many students often misunderstand this convention and think that citing a source and saying what they think about the source are mutually exclusive practices. As Emilia puts it: "if teachers want me to write emotionally then I rely on my own thoughts, but if they want me to cite authors then that is what I must do." She points out that teachers instruct their students to back up any opinions with the law or published sources: "they tell us 'Please, I don't want fluff' and from there we know we must cite and support a thesis." However, because the processes of academic knowledge building and communication are not clear to her, Emilia figures that citing other authors excludes the possibility of saying what she thinks: "they don't say it explicitly. They say 'how do you support your point? Do you cite Cicero? Pythagoras? Do you agree with them?,' 'no professor, for whatever reasons,' 'it's not about what you think.' Then I have to understand and do as they say."

As Emilia feels unable to express her own thoughts, she develops self-generated texts to freely state her opinions about the scholarly sources she reads:

> In my texts sometimes emotions come up and I say: "I disagree with Cicero's ideas about the law. I think it should be this other way" and that's my position and I write it. But I do it because I have internalized that concept, it's not alien to me anymore. It has had an impact on me, and I think "how can he think that way, it was the time of the Romans, another culture, another context, things change." So, I argue with myself, and I begin to write about it with my own position.
>
> A lecturer was talking about politics. During a break I wrote up my thoughts. My classmate told me "Is there really so much to say about politics? I don't understand what politics is." Here I wanted to explain that students say they are political because Aristotle says so. We are mistaken about students' roles when we say we are political simply because Aristotle says so.

As seen above, Emilia writes in her journal in order to state her opinions about the topic of a class or presentation she just attended. In this way, she feels she can appropriate the concepts ("I have internalized that concept, it's not alien to me anymore") and put forward her own voice without it getting lost amidst the sources' voices ("students say they are political because Aristotle says so.") Emilia writes her own opinions that question Cicero's definition of law, Aristotle's definition of politics, or laws about children born out of

wedlock, strikes, or statutory rape. When confronted with the imperative to cite other authors' ideas, Emilia always interrogates herself: "When can I state my point of view, what I think, the way I understand this?" This interrogation "motivates me to write and stand up for what I think, maybe not addressing a person but an empty page where I can say that this is my struggle, and this is what we do about these issues." Thus, instead of suppressing her voice, she writes it in her journal: "I won't get anywhere by showing my anger, so I let the page deal with it."

Likewise, when doing research projects, Emilia draws a distinction between what she needs to hand in to the instructor ("what's in the survey responses") and what she writes in her journal ("my stance on what I noticed when interviewing the lawyer, when seeing the way the judge acted, when seeing the organization of the court, that goes here in the journal"). This is how she explains it:

> They tell you the goal and that it has to be well written. The problem statement is such and such. The survey: 20% think this way. Right, but maybe you saw the lawyer fill out a form with a "yes", but you saw an expression on his face that said "no." Or you noticed that he was lying; he knew that something wasn't true. And the way to deal with your emotions about it is to write it. Because in my text they'll say "Young lady, what is your evidence? Did you record it? Did you take a picture?" They'll say this because that information is not in the survey, so how can you explain it? "No, professor, it's just my perception, what I saw in his face, what I noticed." You can explain this superficially but not what you truly think. Then I just explain what I have found through formal data collection.

What Emilia is perceiving is the dichotomy between two kinds of knowledge. On the one hand, there is "scientific knowledge," purported to be "objective" and "truthful." On the other hand, "everyday" or "personal knowledge" (itself diverse), supposedly "contaminated" by subjective positions. Underlying this dichotomy is the idea that "science" as a way of making knowledge and "scientific knowledge" as the cumulative mass of "scientifically produced" knowledge are "universally" valid, that is, true and applicable anywhere, anytime, and that other types of knowledge are not valuable in the university. Although I cannot issue any opinion on how this division of ways of knowing operates in the context of physical laws, I can say that in the social sciences and the humanities (and also the health sciences, ecology, and other disciplines) the ways of constructing knowledge have been changing and redefining the division

between "science" and "not science" (Mato, n.d.). Despite the fact that critical theory continues to challenge the existence of a "reality" that is independent from subjects' representations thereof (Foucault, 1995), the data above show that "the objective" and "the subjective" are still at odds in the academic space in focus. Therefore, restrictive views of knowledge making are still prevalent.

Félix

Félix also feels a need to build knowledge in a manner that is different from academic conventions. He identifies with a literary, poetical language, and feels that there is a tension between the imperative to produce academic texts and his desire to do so in a "literary" or "emotional" manner. He claims that his "sweet" and "melodic" writing style manages to attract and move people so that they can engage in "deeper thinking" and achieve a "greater understanding" of the text:

> Literary language is deeper, it brings creativity and life to the text, and that promotes thinking, so it's not boring, dense, or hard for the reader. And literary language is important when trying to find more significance and dig deeper into a topic. Each idea provided makes you think, it introduces you to that deeper path that is subjectivism, but without ignoring reality. Through that you can think and better compare reality, you contextualize it in a more sensitive way.

For his courses, Félix tries to write academically but just "to get it done," because he thinks that kind of writing is "shallow" and "cold"; "I don't like to do things that way. I would like for all my writing to be lyrical." Félix's aversion to academic writing is not due to lack of skill; rather, it is due to an attitude toward a specific type of writing, reflecting aspects of an identity he seeks to project: "I don't feel like doing it; I don't like it." In his own words: "when I write academic texts I feel the need to write in a style with which I feel comfortable with, something I like, and something I like so that I can make readers like it." As suggested by Haggis: "People who are learners [of academic reading and writing] may be resisting, or unable to engage with, what higher education assumes, for reasons to do with a sense of alienation (Mann, 2001), perceived risk or personal cost, or contrary philosophical or cultural perspective." (2003, p. 98) This is what seems to be going on with Emilia and Félix.

Even though Félix has tried many times to "enrich" academic texts with a literary style, in general, instructors won't accept this. They have told him:

"you must be concrete, practical, this is not a literature class, that kind of thing. Talk about everything you see, be realistic." Félix describes this situation in detail:

> The professor told me that our writing must be synthetic, go straight to the point without meandering. He explained to me that he won't allow other kinds of writing because it takes longer to read. That's one of the main factors: the time it takes him to review the text. Another reason that he only told me privately is that faculty don't like it when our descriptions are that deep and poetic. I asked him why and he said that professionals must be straightforward.

This excerpt shows an "institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 2003) as it is assumed that academic writing is part of "common sense," when it is actually a linguistic convention, as any other, that is unfamiliar to students like Félix. When the professor states that Félix must be "direct," "synthetic," "realistic," "concrete," or "practical" without explaining why, he fails to communicate the reasons why the student should follow these conventions. This may be due to the instructor's lack of awareness of such reasons. The result is that Félix can't understand how he is supposed to write and why.

This situation prompted Félix to start writing long emails to people he trusts, where he tried to analyze reality including his "subjective" opinion: "I do it my own way with what I feel; if I'm feeling bitter about the topic I write in a way that the bitterness, the melancholy comes across in the text, and my reader answers like 'I can see you are very concerned about this' or 'your analysis is very good and it's an important topic, let's talk about it.'" Félix says that writing this way is satisfying to him because he feels that he is present in his writing and can thus connect with his interlocutors and have an impact on them. Besides, no one will scold him for writing this way because the medium of writing is private emails.

Félix also produces "poetic monographs," in parallel to his college writing. Here he uses a style "that makes you feel and suffer" and, to achieve that goal, he takes excerpts from poems or novels by his favorite authors—mostly those that "lament about life"—and pastes them into his monographs in order to develop his ideas from there. In these monographs, he takes stances about topics from his undergraduate program: political violence or the Ica earthquake. As is the case with Emilia, these are attempts to engage in practices that he deems incompatible with academic writing. These attempts show a clear deployment of agency. If the academic text demands "rationality," "objectivity," and detachment from the text's propositional content, both Emilia

and Félix can't think of a text without getting involved with what they are writing, communicating their voice in a way that shows their involvement and emotions.

In his study of the scientific imaginary in sixteenth century European cartography, Mignolo (1995), argues that one of the features of the *coloniality of power* is the generation of knowledge that is presented as objective, scientific, and universal. This kind of knowledge is devoid of the affective dimension alluded to by Emilia and Félix. Such human knowledge gives for granted that the observer is not part of the observed, that can see the world without being seen or without having to interrogate—not even to themselves—the legitimacy of such observation. The assumption is that we can distance and detach ourselves from the observed and produce truly "objective" knowledge about it. This hegemonic perspective of knowledge production—or *point zero hubris* (Castro Gómez, 2005)—is what Emilia and Félix react against, although they are not sufficiently aware of it to engage in a critical debate about the matter.

Literacy, Identity, and Learning in Emilia and Félix

Emilia and Félix's discontent cannot be reduced to an alternative way of building knowledge; rather, they assert themselves as being certain kinds of people while resisting a college student identity that they simultaneously reject and desire. As indicated by Ivanic (1998), many students consider academic reading and writing to be a kind of "game" where they are asked to perform an identity that "is not me," and does not reflect their self-image.

As an alternative to her voice getting lost in academic writing—and to the continual "loss of herself"—, Emilia deploys other ways to build an alternative identity as a law student that is not the university's ideal one:

> Sometimes I feel more comfortable writing what I feel, what I want, and when I just copy-paste stuff I feel that it is not mine, because anyone can copy-paste text. You go online, find a pretty text and copy-paste it, you move on to another website and find something nice that fits your text and you copy-paste it, and at the bottom of the text you make connections across pieces of other texts, and you put your name on it in the end. But what I try to do is to be disciplined in order to understand the ideas, I must understand.

In Emilia's case, her way of writing and building knowledge is a part of the conflict she feels about the academic identity of a law student that is established in her community of practice. When writing academically, Emilia feels that her

voice is drowned by those from the literature. For her, this symbolizes a passive behavior in relation to the kinds of values and principles she must embrace as a law student. Thus, her self-generated writing is a strategy to channel the "fight" that happens in her mind when she disagrees with the scholarly sources used in her undergraduate program: "The coursework says: 'what are laws? They are norms, but what are they for? To establish order.' 'But that is not real, professor, why is there so much conflict? Why was that law repealed?', in my mind, I fight in my mind." Her vernacular writing enables her to distance herself from the typical law student profile, who "is calm and expresses a more rational and appropriate opinion," and come closer to someone who lets herself be driven by "feelings of sadness and joy," as when she says: "I disagree completely with injustice, and I feel consumed by rage and impotence."

As for Félix, his vernacular writing is also framed within a social practice of permanent construction of his identity as a journalism student. As he puts it: "journalism is much more than just informing or interpreting; above all, it is about being involved in the problem as a whole and being the protagonist; I don't know, to come up with proposals or solutions, and it worries me that none of that kind of research is done." Through his writing, Félix engages in the continual creation of a voice that is present in the text in order to move and have an impact on readers so that his journalism studies become meaningful.

Therefore, reading and writing lie at the core of the search for meaning and identity in spaces of secondary socialization or in those institutional contexts that precede the primary socialization experienced at home—like work, school, or church. It is through literacy practices that people give meaning to their lives and even construct and project desired identities across several situations. For Emilia and Félix, writing, thinking, and feeling are interconnected activities to develop social practices of resistance against adopting a university identity officially imposed. Canagarajah (1997) found a similar connection across reading, writing, and identity among African American students, for whom academic reading and writing were associated with *acting white*.

A final point I would like to highlight is that Emilia and Félix do not establish a dichotomy between university academic writing and self-generated, vernacular writing. They produce the latter kind of writing to better understand scholarly discussions and to clarify questions pertaining to their studies. They thus deploy their vernacular writing as a learning strategy to succeed in college. As Emilia puts it: "When I write and I read it again this clarifies my ideas and brings up more questions and I can go deeper into the topic. I understand it better. I try to make it clearer and I get it, and that makes me relate to the topic." Emilia thus claims that her "emotional" writing helps her

to discover the meaning of a text or "discover her own understanding." In that regard, her writing is a strategy to appropriate concepts and increase learning: "when I write something with an emotional basis, I re-read it and this makes ideas clearer to me. When I write something personal prompted by the literature about it [statutory rape, for example] I can find my own opinion and take it to the course [Child Care Law] and then the idea is developed."

Emilia feels that her "emotional" texts help her to appropriate course content. This is why she disagrees with those of her classmates who think that emotional opinions are worthless. For her "we mustn't restrict ourselves to writing only what is based on the literature in an organized way because that is limiting. If you allow your ideas to come up, you can create another idea, you can come to a conclusion and find the truth."

Likewise, Félix claims that his vernacular writing helps him gain a deeper understanding of what he learns at university. Like Emilia, Félix says that writing "about what I have already studied, but putting my own opinion or analysis into it, is a way that has helped me to develop ideas well enough that I can ace tests." Further, for him, learning about a topic involves sharing what he knows with others because "that feeds into your idea." Félix sends emails to the people with whom he has had previous oral discussions about the topic at hand, but sometimes things happen the other way around too, with written discussions preceding spoken ones.

The above examples show compellingly that examining isolated texts without considering their context of production is not enough to understand how reading and writing work. Reading and writing are connected to specific ways of believing, valuing, and feeling, and also to speech and other sensory modalities and ways of using objects, instruments, technologies, symbols, spaces, and time (Gee, 2001). Félix's case takes us, in turn, to the notion of learning as contextualized, situated practices rather than as an individual process; learning is thus constructed through social interaction with people and tools in the learner's environment (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1998).

The two cases above show that the strategies deployed by Emilia and Félix somehow constitute a "third space" that attempts to resolve the conflict that arises as they try to learn academic writing, while simultaneously failing to successfully negotiate dominant conventions to acquire or create an alternative, legitimate space (Canagarajah, 2003; Gutiérrez 2008). They illustrate how students deploy their agency to negotiate academic literacy and develop new practices and discourses to gain a voice. Although Emilia and Félix are not necessarily aware of it, through their actions related to academic literacy, they engage in the exercise of power, in the sense that they deploy their ability to generate effects and (re)constitute the world.

Concluding Remarks

In recent decades, an *agentive turn* has emerged in different disciplines from postmodern and poststructuralist critiques that challenge impersonal narratives that leave no space for tension, contradiction, or opposition, either from individuals or collectives (Ahearn, 2001). Taking discourse as a form of social action and a cultural resource, we have seen that students are not passive subjects that receive and mechanically reproduce the imperatives of academic literacy. Instead, they deploy actions to generate changes in dominant social representations.

The case studies above show that agency is complex and ambiguous; its scope should not be restricted to empowerment, resistance, or opposition (Ahearn, 2001). Thus, Emilia and Félix resist academic literacy but also accommodate it (assisted by their vernacular literacies) and desire it as part of their university education. Likewise, although their vernacular literacies are empowering initially, they later lose legitimacy due to the force of academic discourse. Then, agency can be of different kinds, issue from different motives, and change and evolve with time.

I will now discuss several implications which follow from what has been discussed so far. First, regarding the "institutional practice of mystery" in academic literacy, I think it is essential to teach this kind of literacy in a much more explicit way so that students won't have to walk the typically painful path leading to its appropriation, a path that is confusing, full of tensions, and lacking clear orientation.

Second, it is important to point out that it is not enough to teach academic writing explicitly if such teaching silences, hurts, and discredits students' alternative ways of expressing themselves. Such forms of expression are social practices that are not only important to young people but sometimes essential to their survival and existence as actors in the new spaces they must negotiate. Yet, these forms of expression are at best ignored by faculty because they assume that students are unable to produce texts at the required level. This deficit discourse obscures students' agency because it construes them as passive subjects lacking the skills to appropriate academic literacy.

Third, I would like to put forward a potentially controversial claim that has been made by other scholars (Canagarajah, 2002). Teaching writing is not only about respecting the self-generated writing practices that students may develop in parallel to academic writing, but about teaching strategies of rhetorical negotiation. If we assume that texts and genres are dynamic and changing rather than static, we shouldn't impose uniform principles and rules of textuality. Rather, students must be allowed to find a voice within academic

writing that reconciles their different identities so that they can be motivated to join communities of practice as rightful participants. It is only in this way that students like Emilia and Félix can *appropriate* academic discourse and creatively change, resist, or reorient existent conventions in accordance with their own goals (Canagarajah, 2003).

Although the deficit model discussed before has been largely abandoned (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), the "crossing model" and its relativist perspective aren't exactly a good match to a critical approach to the relationship between language and society. In relation to the dichotomy between the vernacular and the academic—similar to the contrastive rhetoric perspective——this model establishes the need to build bridges to help students transition from local or vernacular literacies to canonical academic discourse (Canagarajah, 2002). Thus, the two literacies are assumed to be mutually exclusive, and a split subjectivity is promoted: students are asked to be different people in different communities or contexts. Yet, as the two case studies have shown, Emilia and Félix's vernacular texts are not opposed to their academic texts. Instead, the two kinds of texts feed on one another.

At the same time, the "crossing model" corresponds with the argument of "appropriateness" that has been developed in the last decades in "liberal" sociolinguistics in relation to the standard variety and academic literacy (Fairclough, 1995; Pennycook, 2001). From this paradigm, the idea is to teach "appropriate" forms at "appropriate" times from a normative perspective that assumes the dominant conventions of appropriateness to be natural and necessary. Along these lines, it is suggested that students keep their home discourses at home and join academic discourse with a new identity and a new sense of reality. A sociolinguistics of this kind merely reproduces dominant ideological arrangements with a new discourse in favor of "respecting" students.

Several scholars suggest a *negotiation model* where difference is seen as a resource (Canagarajah, 2002). This is a *perspective of empowerment* that—like the notion of funds of knowledge (Gonzales et al., 2005)—assumes that academic texts will be modified creatively in accordance with the strengths that students bring to the table. As a matter of fact, extant research has shown that many students refuse to abandon their cultural practices when they learn academic literacy. And this model requires students to confront the various discourses they face to creatively craft alternate discourses and literacies that can better represent their values and interests. After all, writing is closely linked not only to a sense of belonging to specific communities, but also to social struggle, inequity, cultural differences, and power relationships.

References

Ahearn, L. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *30*, 109-137.

Ashcroft, H., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2000): *Post-colonial studies. The key concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Barton, D. (1994). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Blackwell.

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies. Reading and writing in one community*. Routledge.

Boughey, C. (2000). Multiple metaphors in an understanding of academic literacy. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 6 (3), 279-290.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Canagarajah, S. (1997). Safe houses in the contact zone: coping strategies of African American students in the academy. *College Composition and Communication*, *48*(2), 173-196.

Canagarajah, S. (2002). *Critical academic writing and multilingual students*. The University of Michigan Press.

Canagarajah, A. S. (2003). Practicing multiliteracies. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *12*, 151-179.

Cassany, D. (2008). *Prácticas letradas contemporáneas* [Contemporary literacy practices]. Ríos de Tinta.

Cassany, D. (2011). Sobre las fronteras retóricas del español escrito [On the rhetorical borders of written Spanish]. *Cuadernos Comillas*, 1, 37-51.

Castro Gómez, S. (2007). Decolonizar la Universidad. La hybris del punto cero y el diálogo de Saberes [Decolonizing the university. Point zero hubris and the dialogue across ways of knowing]. In J.L. Saavedra (Ed.), *Educación superior, interculturalidad y descolonización* [Higher education, interculturality and decolonization] (pp. 291-307). La Paz.

Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in late modernity. Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh University Press.

Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge University Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Historia de la sexualidad. La voluntad del saber* [The history of sexuality. The will to knowledge]. Siglo XXI.

Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis.

Gee, J. P. (2001). Foreword. In T. M. Kalmar, *Illegal alphabets and adult biliteracy. Latino migrants crossing the linguistic border* (pp. iii-v). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Giddens, A. (1995). *La constitución de la sociedad: Bases para una teoría de la estructuración,* [The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration]. Amorrortu.

Gonzales, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms*. Routledge.

Gutiérrez, K. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *43*(2), 148-164.
Gutiérrez, K., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, *32*(5), 19-25.
Haggis, T. (2003). Constructing images of ourselves? A critical investigation into 'approaches to learning' research in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 29*(1), 89-104. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192032000057401
Heller, M. (2007). Bilingualism as ideology and practice. In M. Heller (Ed.), *Bilingualism: A social approach* (pp. 1-22). Palgrave.
Hendricks, M., & Lynn, Q. (2000). Teaching referencing as an introduction to epistemological empowerment. *Teacher in Higher Education, 5*(4), 447-457.
Hirst, E., Henderson, R., Allan, M., Bode, J., & Mehtap, K. (2004). Repositioning academic literacy: Charting the emergence of a community of practice. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 27*(1), 66-80.
Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Perú [Peruvian National Statistics Institute]. (2001). *Encuesta Nacional de Hogares* (ENAHO) [National Home Survey]. Instituto Nacional de Estadística.
Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: the discoursal construction of identity in academic writing*. John Benjamins.
Ivanic, R., & Moss, W. (2004). La incorporación de las prácticas de escritura de la comunidad en la educación [Incorporating community writing practices to education]. In V. Zavala, M. Niño-Murcia & P. Ames (Eds.), *Escritura y sociedad. Nuevas perspectivas teóricas y etnográficas* (pp. 211-246). Red para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Sociales en el Perú.
Kubota, R. (2010). Cross-cultural perspectives on writing: contrastive rhetoric. In N. Hornberger & S. L. McKay (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*. Multilingual Matters.
Kubota, R., & Lehner, A. (2004). Toward critical contrastive rhetoric. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 7-27.
Lave, J. (1996). Teaching, as Learning, in Practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *3*(3), 149-164.
Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
Lillis, T. (2003). Student writing as 'academic literacies': Drawing on Bakhtin to move from critique to design. *Language and Education, 17*(3), 192-207.
Mato, D. (n.d.). Actualizar los postulados de la Reforma Universitaria de 1918 [Updating the tenets of the 1918 University Reform].
Mignolo, W. (1995). *The darker side of the Renaissance. Literacy, territoriality and colonization*. The University of Michigan Press.
Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics. A critical introduction*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
Piller, I. (2007). Linguistics and intercultural communication. *Language and Linguistics Compass, 1*(3), 208-226.
Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context.* Oxford University Press.

Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
Street, B. (Ed.) (1993): *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge University Press.
Turner, J. (2003). Academic literacy in post-colonial times: Hegemonic norms and transcultural possibilities. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *3*(3), 187-197.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1998): *Collected works*. Plenum.
Wertsch, J. (1998). La tarea del análisis sociocultural [The task of sociocultural análisis]. In *La mente en acción*. Aique.
Zavala, V., & Córdova, G. (2010): *Decir y Callar. Lenguaje, equidad y poder en la educación superior* [To speak or not to speak: Language, equity and power in higher education]. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.
Zavala, V., Niño-Murcia, M., & Ames, P. (Eds.) (2004). *Escritura y sociedad. Nuevas perspectivas teóricas y etnográficas* [Writing and society: New theoretical and ethnographic perspectives]. Red para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Sociales en el Perú.

Reflection

In this text, written more than a decade ago, I tried to share a sociocultural and critical perspective on writing (and learning), which was perhaps not very widespread at that time in the Latin American context. The perspective of writing as a social practice not only implies situating writing within social activities or relating it to the sense of belonging to specific communities, but also conceptualizing it as traversed by ideologies and power relations.

Based on two ethnographically surveyed case studies, I questioned the deficit discourse so deeply rooted in the teaching of writing, which erases the possibility of seeing students with agency. Using case studies of Emilia and Félix, first-year university students from Ayacucho (Perú), and bilingual Spanish/Quechua speakers, I showed that they were not passive subjects incapable of appropriating academic writing, but agents who acted in the world within the social structures that had delimited their subjectivity. For them, learning academic writing at the university was closely linked to ways of believing, valuing, feeling and being. From the analysis conducted, I questioned a normative perspective in the teaching of academic writing and proposed the development of strategies for rhetorical negotiation, with the aim of students finding their own voice in academic discourse.

Looking back on this work after so many years, and contrary to what is sometimes believed, I realize that case studies can be powerful, in the sense that they can be used to problematize phenomena and even rethink theoretical categories. When I remember everything I learned from (and with) Emilia and Felix, I reaffirm my commitment to the ethnographic approach as a counter-hegemonic methodology that allows us to build dense interpretations,

develop an intense collaboration with social actors, and denaturalize taken for granted notions. Perhaps today I would try to look at these phenomena longitudinally in order to have access to these processes over time and not be left with an 'x-ray' that only gives an account of a particular moment. I would like to know what happened to these students when they advanced in their careers and after they graduated. I would like to know what kinds of agentive literacy practices they developed, in what kind of contexts, and for what kind of citizenship.

– Virginia Zavala