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# “I hate the ESL idea!”: A Case Study in Identity and Academic Literacy

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*This case study of an undergraduate student in a Canadian university analyzes her resistance/acceptance of practices and possibilities for participation in academic discourses. Analyzing her responses to feedback on her writing, this study shows the strategies she engages for negotiating her multiple and contradictory identifications as she learns to write.*

*Cette étude de cas est centrée sur une étudiante du premier cycle dans une université canadienne. Ses réactions (résistance et acceptation) à des pratiques et à des occasions de participation au discours académique sont analysées. En analysant les réactions de l'étudiante aux commentaires portant sur ses rédactions, l'auteure démontre les stratégies qu'elle emploie pour négocier ses identités multiples et contradictoires pendant son apprentissage.*

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## Introduction

The site of academic writing today is a nexus for several powerful forces: the internationalization of higher education and of English; the increasing heterogeneity of university populations; and poststructural, postmodern challenges to traditional ways of representing and legitimating knowledge (Jones, Turner, & Street, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Pennycook, 1994). These forces elicit official and unofficial discourses about the so-called *problem* of student writing and a corresponding solution in a *skills* approach to teaching academic literacy. Recent research into academic literacy challenges the conceptualizations of language implicit in such approaches and interrogates the regulation of meaning-making in academic discourses (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001, 2003; Silva & Matsuda, 2001). Rather than viewing language as a transparent conduit for meaning to be possessed and produced by an individual—the assumption behind a skills approach—language is understood as constructing meanings. Academic discourses are situated in historical, cultural, institutional, and social contexts in which meanings are contested (Lea, 2005). Reading and writing in university are defined as “socially situated discourse practices which are ideologically inscribed” (Lillis, 2003, p. 194). From this understanding, the increasing diversity and destabilization of higher education can be seen as an opportunity to raise questions about the nature of the academy and its reading/writing practices.

As Jones et al. (2000) argue, we need to rethink higher education and academic literacy not in terms of skills and effectiveness, but rather at the level of epistemology, identity, and power: What counts as knowledge? Who decides? How is the self and agency constituted in academic reading/writing practices? How does the academy present its activities as neutral and given rather than partial and ideological, particularly in requirements for and assessment of writing? These broad questions resist the marginalization of those categorized as nontraditional students, and of writing support, as somehow outside legitimate scholarly activity and point to central cultural, ideological, and epistemological issues at the heart of reading/writing practices in university. These concerns are shared by composition theorists in the United States (Bazerman, 2004; Lu, 1992); New Literacy Studies researchers in the United Kingdom (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001, 2003); and North American genre theorists (Giltrow, 2002a, 2002b). Although many studies analyze academic discourse practices and composition pedagogy, there is a lack of research that presents the perspective of student writers (Lillis, 2001). In order to address practices that limit educational possibilities for nontraditional students, it is important to understand how student writers negotiate conflicting identities as they struggle to appropriate academic discourses (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

The purpose of this research is to explore the process of appropriating academic discourses from a student's perspective. This case study of an undergraduate student in a Canadian university investigates the multiple and contradictory identifications that affect the learning of academic literacy. Initially, I had planned to research instructors' perspectives on second-language writing and students' responses to instructors' feedback. Sensitive to ethical issues of research design (e.g., researching *with* rather than *about* others), I chose to share my initial questions with one of the students in my study (Alcoff, 1991; Lather, 1991). These tentative questions had been addressed to instructors marking student papers: What textual features signal to them the position *ESL writer*? How do instructors evaluate papers with *excellent content but poor grammar*, and how do they explain their evaluation criteria? I found that this student's responses to my research ideas opened up rich questions about the links between identity and academic literacy for second-language writers. A central question emerged, which forms the basis for the study reported here: How do students resist or accept the practices, positions, and possibilities made available to them for participation in academic discourses?

### Theorizing Identity

As discourses "systematically form the objects of which they speak," (Foucault, 1972, p. 49), educational discourses produce and regulate available positions and meanings in academic literacy. However, the student

writer is both subject of and subject to discourse (Weedon, 1997). Giddens (1984) suggests that rather than taking up a ready-made social position, one engages in practices of “positioning” (p. 84). Theorizing the recursivity of agency and structure, Giddens sees both as ongoing, active processes rather than as fixed entities. Such an understanding of the contingency of social action underlines a poststructuralist view of identity as a fluid, reflexive project. Hall (1996) describes the incomplete and contradictory processes of identification, pointing to the importance of accounting for how

individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the “positions” to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and “perform” these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves. (p. 14)

Thus as students learn to participate in academic discourse communities, they are negotiating a complex process of both identifying and not identifying with the positions offered to them. One of the positions offered to student writers at university is that of second-language writer, or more commonly, an English as a second language (ESL) student. My study shows how one student engages in what Hall terms a “constant, agonistic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating” this position. In the next section, I discuss difficulties with the use of *ESL* as a way to position students.

### **The Problematic Position of *ESL***

In his study “The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability,” McDermott (1993) describes how the available category *learning disability* (LD) was waiting to be filled by Adam, a child who is variously able in elementary school situations. McDermott follows Adam through various elementary school activities and shows how certain practices seem especially well arranged to display his failure to meet certain standards and thus to provide a ready candidate for the position of LD student. Similarly, we can see that the *ESL* label serves the function of locating deficit, and for students *summoned* to this position, it may stereotype them and limit their possibilities.

Arranged for the benefit of schooling and institutional practices, for example, for the allocation of funding and resources, *ESL* remains a major organizing category in educational discourses despite critiques that it distorts and obscures historical and social contexts (Cook, 1999; Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Thesen, 1997). Studies show that the *second language* assumed in the label *ESL* may actually be a third or a fifth: learners may be multilingual; or a learner may not have a full grasp of any previous language

or may identify as English-speaking (Leung et al.; Nero, 1997; Toohey, 2000). Thesen, writing about Black South African students at university, shows that the way students are labeled often does not correspond with how they identify themselves, even though the labels stick and constrain how they are received. Leung et al. (1997), studying multiethnic urban classrooms in the UK, found that students labeled *ESL* identified themselves as English-speaking. Nero, in her study of Anglophone Caribbean college students, shows that some speakers who identify as English-speaking may not fit in either the native speaker or the *ESL* category. Toohey found that one of the supposedly *ESL* students in her study set in primary classrooms in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia really used only one language: English.

Students are always engaged in positioning, not only being positioned by others. Leung et al. (1997) emphasize the importance of attending to how learners “actively construct their own patterns of language use, ethnicity, and social identity” (p. 544), which often contradict the reified and fixed identities attributed to them. Their study in multiethnic urban classrooms found that existing categories and notions of “the idealized native speaker” (p. 544) failed to take account of the hybrid identities of postcolonial diaspora that characterized the students’ own language affiliations, allegiances, and backgrounds. These hybrid identities affect how students make meaning through texts and may conflict with dominant academic practices (Lu, 1992).

## Learning to Write

As students learn to write in university, they are confronted by “normative or regulative rules” (Hall, 1996, p. 14) that define their relations to academic discourse practices. Attitudes toward second-language learners and their writing, Severino (1998) suggests, can be mapped along a “continuum” of “political stances”: separatist, accommodationist, and assimilationist (p. 189). The separatist position holds that cultural and linguistic minorities should not have to change: discrimination against these speakers should change instead. In terms of responses to writing, a separatist position would emphasize fluency and meaning and celebrate cultural differences, including differences in rhetorical patterns. Such a position, Severino points out, can leave students ill-prepared for situations that require standard English usage. In opposition to this stance, Severino describes the assimilationist stance, which regards linguistic deviations from standard English as errors to be eliminated. Severino favors an accommodationist stance, which in her view blends the best of the separatist and the assimilationist positions. In this stance, the goal is to acquire new linguistic competence without losing previous knowledge. With this enlarged linguistic repertoire, students are able to draw on varied types of language use, and diverse languages, as appropriate on various occasions.

Severino's (1998) accommodationist stance does not necessarily include a critique of the social relations that deem some speech appropriate and other speech inappropriate. Norton Peirce (1989) argues that it is necessary to think critically about appropriate usage and its purposes, to question whose interests are served by rules of usage, to encourage learners to "explore what might be desirable" (p. 409) or possible, not only what is appropriate, and to "explore how English can be used to challenge the very conditions on which these sociolinguistic rules are based" (p. 407). Benesch (1993), writing about English for Academic Purposes (EAP), contends that EAP attempts to adapt second-language students to the status quo in the name of a pragmatism that serves institutions more than it does students. Naming this a "politics of pragmatism" (p. 713), Benesch argues that pragmatic approaches endorse "current power relations in academia and society" (p. 711). This critique of pragmatism is particularly important in the context of institutional discourses on acculturating *nontraditional* students—the *problem*—through quick-fix *skills* approaches. Benesch is critical of approaches that accept university-level literacy practices as "positive artifacts of a normative academic culture into which *ESL* students should be assimilated" (p. 710). Like Lillis (2001) and others (Jones et al., 2000), Benesch questions how academic practices are presented as neutral, obscuring their ideological basis. Assuming "a normative academic culture" is also problematic: academic discourse is not monolithic: there are specific constraints and conventions in each discipline; even individual classrooms have their own culture (Zamel, 1995). Teaching critical language awareness can help students to understand the situated and ideological nature of academic literacy (Clark & Ivanic, 1997).

Learning to write in a particular discourse community is also learning who you can be in that community (Miller, 1994). In her study of student writing at university, Lillis (2001) analyzes how student identity is constituted in the process of writing a text. Drawing on Clark and Ivanic's (1997) work on writing and identity, Lillis develops a heuristic for exploring student meaning-making in contexts of culture and situation. To Clark's first questions, which point to constraints on students' choices while writing, Lillis adds a second set of questions, which indicate student desires for meaning-making.

Who can you be? Who do you want to be?  
How can you say it? How do you want to say it?  
What can you say? What do you want to say? (p. 51)

Students struggle to gain a sense of authorship and authority within the constraints of academic discourses. The conflicting identifications are especially acute for those positioned *outside*: nontraditional students at university. As the following case study shows, writing choices and revisions in response to feedback are a process of negotiating desires and constraints at

every turn; and at almost every turn, the normative position *ESL* student must be confronted.

### **Case Study: A Student's Experience**

This case study focuses on the experiences of one undergraduate student, Susan (her choice of pseudonym), who at the time of the study was taking courses in business administration and Latin American studies. I had met her originally six months before as my student in a first-year academic writing course taught through distance education. After the course was over, Susan and I met at the university's writing center and began an exchange: I worked with her on her drafts for her new courses that term, and she agreed to share her writing with me and to allow me to interview her.

In addition to three one- to two-hour interviews with Susan, which took place over the fall term, my data also included several textual sites: her written drafts and papers, instructor's and writing center consultant's written responses to her, and assignment descriptions. I conducted, taped, and transcribed the interviews myself and coded data for emerging themes. For purposes of analysis, I divided the data into three sections. In the first section, Susan responds to my description of my tentative research plan. Her responses surprised me and shifted the direction of my inquiry. The second section covers Susan's initial response to my question about what she needed to support her learning of writing. Again, her responses influenced me and deepened my interest in issues of identity that may arise for second-language learners. This section also includes my follow-up interview with her. This gave her an opportunity to read and review the transcripts I had prepared, to discuss (and/or challenge) my interpretations, to reflect again, and to report her further interpretation of her own words in the first interview. This type of checking helped to strengthen my analysis and also provided an opportunity for "catalytic validity," which Lather (1991) describes as opening a potential space for increased self-understanding and transformative action. The third section of data includes interview excerpts; Susan's early draft of a paper; a writing consultant's written response to her on this draft via electronic mail; and the final, marked copy of the assignment. This was an assignment for a course in business communications. I present some of Susan's interpretations of the revision suggestions for her draft and her choices for revision. I also analyzed the final version of her paper to see how she implemented, or refused to implement, both the instructor's and the writing center consultant's suggestions. This reflexive methodology enhanced the strengths of a case study approach, which provides rich details about specific contexts of learning.

Susan's background shows her complex social location. A 27-year-old undergraduate student from the Ukraine, she began learning English in school at age 6. She graduated from university in the Ukraine with a degree

in English literature and taught English as a foreign language for several years before coming to Canada to pursue a second degree. This experience, and her desire to succeed at university, came through clearly in the interviews. Susan identifies as an excellent student; she assessed her final mark on the paper (an A-) as “fair” or “okay.” Because she did not sound overjoyed, I asked her what kind of grades she liked to get. She replied “A+” and we laughed and talked about her determination to do well. She also talked about a paper that she had written for philosophy on abortion, about which she had strong opinions. Although she received a low mark, Susan said, “I really loved that work.” She valued this written expression of her ideas. Her personal history as an English major and as a tutor of English in her home country contributed to her sense of herself as someone who knew English language and grammar. She said at one point, “I love the English language.”

“*I hate the ESL idea!*” In the following excerpt, Susan responds to my tentative research questions. I presented my overall research to her and asked for her feedback. We read together a proposal I had drafted with these questions at the end.

The following questions will be explored: what assumptions do instructors make about student writers as they read their papers? What textual features signal to them the position “ESL writer”? How do instructors evaluate papers with “excellent content but poor grammar,” and how do they explain their evaluation criteria?

I asked Susan what she thought of this (I list myself as interviewer by first name in all transcripts).

*Susan:* It seems “sound” [Pause]. Though I hate the ESL idea! And, uh, it’s a cliché and I don’t like to be clichéd in any way. And I think that the first time ever in my life I was clichéd [was] as an ESL.

*Bonnie (interviewer):* Uh huh (agreement sound in background).

*Susan:* Some of the things do hurt a lot, and, um, I think that as you mentioned about, uh, what signals to you that particular student is an *ESL* to some extent influences your ideas about this particular person. And something that kind of gives you, probably—I don’t want to say that it definitely does—but probably, gives you a chance to say: “Okay, this grade is fine for this particular person because he or she is an *ESL*; so for you, or for your level, being an *ESL* you did good.” So.

*Bonnie:* [realizing that Susan is identifying me as a marker who may hold the above attitudes] Yeah ... those are exactly the kinds of attitudes I’m hoping to get at ... I, I, I [stumbling over my words] understand from what you are saying that you are, um, putting me in the position of an instructor, and ... you’re right, I have marked papers ... I know

how I was doing it but I was wondering how other people were doing it, you know? I was curious, I mean ... [voice drops, pause].

*Susan*: Yeah. (Pause). Probably for me it's, uh, a little bit (hah—breath out, pause) too much personal, I'd say. Because, uh, I'd say, like, when you hear a comment on the style, "Well, please excuse me for being an English major and for being picky," then you kind of really question your own identity, and your own being there, and so on and so on. (Pause. Hmmm of agreement from interviewer can be heard in the background). And so we're all clichéd to some extent. Saying that you're an English major I think is a cliché that probably gives you the chance to, not punish, but to judge people. And it probably doesn't really give you a chance to dig deep into the problem.

In this excerpt, Susan resists being categorized, or as she puts it, "clichéd." As a meaningless, empty phrase, a cliché operates as a cipher, denoting an absence of meaningful engagement. As a stereotype, it obscures as it names. Susan also uses *ESL* as a category in itself: "an ESL." In changing *ESL* into a name or noun, she demonstrates the capacity of this label to reify, to produce an objectified, reductive subject position. Using *ESL* this way underscores how this label can override the other positions it might be attached to, such as, *ESL student* or *ESL writer*. Important in these phrases is the *ESL* part, not her experience as a student and writer. She is named this way, and she does not like it. Susan goes on to talk about the effect: it hurts. It hurts because it stereotypes her into a category that can be used institutionally and educationally to limit possibilities for herself and other students like her. It hurts because it does not recognize the complexity of her experiences as a second-language learner. She animates her history as a successful student, and as an English major herself in her home country, to construct a resistant subject position and to counter this label that reduces and reifies her as "an ESL."

This was a point in the interview where I began to realize a power shift, where the participant began to take control, disrupting to a certain extent the usual power relations of the interview (with the researcher in control) (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992). I started to recognize this change when Susan was able to name her feelings so directly—"Some of the things do hurt a lot"—and continued by using *you*, naming me as the teacher, the one who might hurt her by my attitudes and comments. At this point I became uncomfortable and offered a rambling answer. I realized I would have to "dig deeper into the problem" (to use Susan's words) and to question my use of terms such as *the ESL writer*.

"Acceptable as normal by native speakers": This next excerpt shows Susan talking about how she is positioned, this time in relation to the "idealized native speaker" (Leung et al., 1997). She both internalizes this standard and resists it. I was surprised at her answer to my general question: "What do you



need to improve your writing?" I had assumed that she might say something about what kind of instruction she needed: perhaps better feedback on her papers or more detailed assignment criteria.

Susan began by answering that she wanted to improve her writing because she had dreams, high aspirations, and she wanted to fulfill her dreams; so she needed to improve her writing. I listened to this answer, but what I had expected was for her to list the kinds of interventions or strategies that would help her. So I prompted her:

*Bonnie:* But what do you need? What would help?

*Susan:* To become a native speaker.

*Bonnie:* Mmmm (to my ears, this sounds like "oh, dear").

*Susan:* So nobody hears my accent, nobody sees my mistakes. Even though I think it's not right (a little out breath laugh/not really laugh), but ... mmm. [Reads question again]: "What do I need to improve my writing?" It's very complicated.

[She continues to offer answers, beginning by saying that she had originally thought it would be as easy as figuring out correct usage of, e.g., a gerund.] She ends by saying, "[what I need is] to be able to express myself at the level which is *acceptable* as normal by native speakers."

Despite many critiques of the *native speaker construct* in recent research (Cook, 1999; Nero, 2005; Braine, 1999), English-language learners are still persistently portrayed as "deficient communicator[s], struggling, but failing, to reach an idealized L2 linguistic [i.e., native-like] norm" (Belz, 2003, p. 212). The native/nonnative speaker dichotomy continues to haunt the field of TESL and to trouble teaching and learning. The privileged dialect of standard English dominates academic literacy; to demonstrate membership in academic discourse communities, one must sound like this specific kind of native speaker, as Susan recognizes.

When Susan and I played this part of the tape again a week later with my typed transcription in front of us, I asked her about the tone she used and her slight sigh when she said "acceptable." She described her tone as ironic. She both accepts and resists the hegemony of a native speaker ideology that dictates who gains entry to scholarly conversations, whose speech will be deemed acceptable and be allowed recognition and reception (Bourdieu, 1991). We discussed this for a moment—how she was critiquing the notion of a single normative level at the same time as acknowledging the existence of this norm. Her desire to attain this imagined and idealized standard is countered by her recognition of its injustice (this offered a teachable moment for critical language awareness). The label *ESL* has powerful effects in Susan's life. At the same time as she internalizes this stigma, she rejects it. She acknowledges that she is positioned this way, but resists this positioning

because it does not relate to her own sense of identity. She has been an English major, a tutor of English herself. Now she finds herself viewed in a way that limits, distorts, and obscures her identification as a successful student. To resist, she animates some of her other multiple subject positions that conflict with the reductive label *ESL*.

*Insurgent readings: negotiating writing choices.* This next section of data demonstrates Susan's resistance to, as well as her acceptance of, suggestions for changing a draft paper given by a writing consultant in the university's writing center. In some instances, she accedes that the writing consultant who made the suggestions—a native speaker she has worked with before—"knows best" (Susan's words). In other instances, she chooses to make her own decisions either to not enact a suggestion or to use a different revision strategy. In her own words above, Susan knows that she needs to be "*acceptable* as normal by native speakers," but she also wants to understand directions, not just follow them.

This assignment, for a class in business communications, is in a memo format addressed to other business students, and its purpose is to define the term *junk bonds*. This assignment may be intended to teach about types of business correspondence, about defining terms, and about directing your text to particular readers. Susan sent the draft by electronic mail to a writing consultant, who replied also by e-mail. I interviewed Susan, asking her to report her understanding of the consultant's extensive comments on the draft and the instructor's brief comments on the final copy. The following excerpt shows how Susan interpreted suggestions for revision and how she implemented them (or not) in her final version. Susan reads the first sentence of the draft memo as she originally wrote it:

Following recent trends to diversification in the securities portfolio management, I'm providing new students majoring in Finance with an explanation of the term, junk bonds, denoting a fixed income security which in the last decade gained an extreme popularity as an investment mechanism.

In her e-mail, the consultant had typed the following suggestion after the word *diversification*: "could you change 'to' to 'toward'?" When Susan reads this comment, she says: "the words are similar. I understand *to* shows the direction; that's why I put *to*. And I'm still kind of unaware why *toward* is a better word than *to*." In the final draft, as seen below, Susan uses *toward*. The consultant also suggests that the sentence end after the word *term*;

Could you end the sentence here and then start a new one which begins with "junk bonds denote a fixed income security?" I get a little lost in the sentence so I need it broken up a bit. Also, by starting a new sentence you can remind the reader that your topic is junk bonds.

Susan reports her acceptance of this suggestion, saying that it will “give a better understanding.” Her final version breaks up this sentence, although not exactly as suggested.

The consultant also comments on two instances of article usage: *the* before “securities portfolio management” and *an* before “extreme popularity.” In both cases, she writes, “I don’t think you need the article [*an* or *the*] here.” Susan comments on the *an*: “As again, articles are always my problem ... [she reads] ‘an extreme popularity.’ It’s singular; so, I think I should have an article.” In the final version, Susan leaves in the article *an*. (On the final marked copy *an* is crossed off by the instructor.) The final version of her opening reads,

Junk bonds in the last decade gained an extreme popularity as an effective investment mechanism. However, many investment specialists view junk bonds as one of the most contradictory issues present in the field of investment. Following recent trends toward diversification in securities portfolio management, I’m providing new students majoring in Finance with an explanation of the term “junk bond” denoting a fixed income security.

This final version demonstrates the changes that Susan has incorporated from the suggestions she received. Although it reads more easily, and thus may have contributed to her A– mark on this paper, her experience of revising has involved acceptance of both suggestions that she does not understand, as well as those that she does. This example also shows her resisting implementing a suggestion she did not agree with. Such resistance is not uncommon in her revision choices. Sometimes she rejected the writing consultant’s suggestion and asserted her own knowledge.

In another example, Susan chose a verb form that differed from the one suggested. Here is a sentence from her draft, with the consultant’s comments separated on the e-mail reply by brackets:

The most important aspect of the [I don’t think you need the “the” article] junk bonds is that they serve [“a”] valid purpose—provide [providing] financing to the small companies.

Susan’s final version reads:

The most important aspect of junk bonds is that they serve a valid purpose—to provide financing to the small companies.

Here Susan accepted the suggestions about articles—removing one and adding another—but invented a different revision strategy for handling the verb. The final version reads easily. In choosing both to follow and to reject suggested revision strategies, Susan demonstrates her diverse, contradictory

identifications as a good student, past English major, and *ESL* student positioned in relation to a native speaker.

## Conclusion

This case study calls into question the intelligibility of received categories (such as *native speaker*, *non-native speaker*, and *ESL learner*) and shows how they affect the educational experiences of an undergraduate student struggling to attain academic success. This study also shows how one learner both resists and accepts writing instruction (responses to her writing by a writing consultant). She negotiates how she is positioned and how she positions herself, animating her discursive history to counter the limiting position of *ESL* that she faces. Even though such classification may assist in obtaining resources and support, I argue that the use of *ESL* (as in *ESL student*, *ESL writer*, *ESL learner*) is problematic. In addition to often being inaccurate, it has become associated with a deficiency that needs to be *fixed*.

Various solutions to this *problem*, described by Severino's (1998) range of "political stances" (p. 198) toward acculturation, generate varied educational practices. The extreme assimilationist position, which attempts to make second-language learners into native speakers, echoes Susan's answer, "To become a native speaker." This painful statement, along with the recognition that it is not possible to become what she is not, is situated in discursive practices that discriminate against speakers who deviate from the norm.

Cook (1999) argues against using the reified categories of *native speaker* and *nonnative speaker* in understanding language learning. Because by definition someone who learns a second language can never become a native speaker of that language, native speaker status remains an impossible goal. To counter the *deficit* focus and monolingual dominance implicit in *nonnative speaker*, he posits instead the concept of *second language user* (L2 user) and suggests that it is more useful to think of those using a second language as multi-competent. However, *native speaker* still remains a powerful position in discourses of language learning, and Susan negotiates her identity in relation to it.

Susan also finds the separatist approach that Severino describes lacking. She sees through its intent—"good enough for an *ESL*"—an overtolerance of deviation that will not prepare her for the advanced education she is pursuing. The solution of accommodation, using one's diverse linguistic competences appropriately as the occasion demands, tends to ignore the power relations that determine who decides what is appropriate when, where, and for whom. However, an expanded repertoire is necessary. To pretend otherwise would be to ignore existing structural inequities. An expanded repertoire needs to be accompanied by critical thinking about language and its usage. Such a critical awareness about language was suggested by Susan's use of irony in her statement: "[What I need] is to express myself at the level

which is *acceptable* as normal by native speakers." She does not say that she needs to attain a fixed standard of English, but rather recognizes that what is acceptable is a norm determined by the speech of the dominant-class native speakers.

Mapping out an economy of language and power, Bourdieu (1991) demonstrates that language use "likely to be recognized as *acceptable*" is that variant spoken by those of high social status: "holders of the legitimate competence" (pp. 55, 69), whose linguistic products set the norm. For too long certain native speakers of English have claimed the dominant competence. However, these normative practices, these norms, are maintained and reproduced (or not) by daily discursive practices in institutions and can be subverted by the agency of participants in their daily choices, attitudes, and actions (Giddens, 1984). The norms for appropriate academic language use can be resisted to varying degrees in varied contexts. Institutions of higher education are undergoing rapid changes, and alternative epistemologies and identities are unsettling academic discourses. Teachers can contribute to alternative practices and possibilities by recognizing and legitimizing the multicompetence of their students.

Students are quite capable of producing both legitimate and insurgent readings, of playing the game for success and sustaining a critical resistance (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995); in doing this, students draw on their diverse "discursive histories" (p. 57). Susan drew on her multiple identifications as a good student and a past English major and tutor to help her resist how she was positioned as "an ESL." She took pride in her own work. She had "loved" her paper on abortion, which she felt expressed her ideas well, even though it had not received a high mark. The choices Susan made for revision also reflected her negotiation between contradictory positions: as "an ESL" who accepts that the native speaker "knows best"; as a critical thinker who will not accept without understanding; as someone who knows rules of usage; and as a student who wants to produce an A paper. Her desires for her future, her discursive histories, and her social locations enact a multiple set of *positionings* that encourage both acceptance and resistance to the normative relations of university. The "learning of a language is [motivated by] the construction of the identities we desire and the communities we want to join in order to engage in communication and social life" (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 117). Susan's choices demonstrate both constraints (what she can be, how and what she can write) as well as desires (what she wants to be and to write) (Lillis, 2001).

Many university students positioned as ESL learners do not have Susan's extensive background in English language and literature. Their discursive histories might not provide such a rich source for resistance. This case study, although perhaps limited in terms of generalizability, provides insight into the complexity behind choices students make as they negotiate entry into

academic discourse communities and suggests that further research into second-language learners' identities and perspectives is needed to better understand their struggles. In supporting these students, as teachers we can encourage a critique of the ideological assumptions that undergird academic literacy, acknowledge diverse sources of knowledge (not only academic knowledge), and explore multiple readings or ways of interpreting the world. In looking beyond the label *ESL*—or any category that confines our view toward students—we can create conditions that foster expanded possibilities for all participants. Part of this project involves being open to the challenges sparked by the resources and insights of students.

### *The Author*

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## *Appendix*

### *Research Ethics Considerations*

In this appendix, I offer a few reflections on ethical issues that arose as I designed and conducted this research and on my attempts to enact more reciprocal and respectful research practices. In addition to the usual power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, other inequities were present in this research. I had been Susan's teacher, and although I was no longer in this position during this research project, this status lingered. This became immediately apparent in the first interview when Susan addressed me as one of the teachers who stereotype ESL writers. Also I was clearly researching the other: in terms of the native/nonnative speaker binary, I was by definition a native speaker of English, whereas Susan, despite her expressed desires to be like a native speaker, was by definition a nonnative speaker of English. This research has shown that although we may deconstruct this binary and demonstrate its lack of descriptive validity and theoretical rigor, it still has powerful effects. So I was aware of my sites of privilege in relation to my research participant. Acknowledging these inequities, I still am committed as a researcher to face these dilemmas, and rather than being paralyzed by the dangers of inquiry, to engage them from a perspective of "exploring new methodological economies of responsibility and possibility" (Lather, 1998, p. 19). In this study, I tried to involve my research participant (Susan) from the beginning in the research design, sharing with her my tentative research questions and asking for her input. I also shared the transcripts of all interviews with her, and we discussed these. This recursivity and reflexivity influenced the direction of the research and I believe strengthened its validity. Of course, as researcher, I was benefiting from these dialogues with Susan. My offer of free consultation on her assignments that term was an attempt to make the exchange more visible and to show that she was providing something of value. I also hope that her development as a writer was assisted by the opportunity offered by her participation in the research to attend carefully to her own writing and to instructors' feedback. However, my name is on this article, not hers; my analysis gains the final word. Acknowledging and addressing ethical issues in ethnographic research is necessary, but even the best intentioned and most carefully conducted research is not without these and other limits and dilemmas.