

Interrelated Influence of Internal and External Factors on Malaysian Learners' Self-concept in Academic Writing

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The study examines the factors that shape Malaysian learners' academic self-concept in a specific subject, academic writing (in L2). Data were generated through a mixed methods approach, with an initial survey of 170 students, followed by two semi-structured interviews with each of eight student participants. The quantitative phase of the study identified that there were different self-concepts involved in the formulation of self-concept in academic writing (e.g., self-concept in English and self-concept as a writer). The qualitative findings from four student participants (selected from the eight) further expanded on these and identified interrelated internal and external factors that shape the L2 learners' self-concept and engagement in academic writing. The study proposed that there is a complementary relationship between multiple internal and/or external factors that are available to students, and that this may influence the nature of their actions in the academic writing class. Overall, this study demonstrated that an L2 learner's self-concept in academic writing is complex and multifaceted and that Malaysia's socio-historical setting tended to have a direct impact in the formulation of this academic self-concept. In light of these findings from the study, it is recommended that institutions provide a supportive educational environment (i.e., appropriate student-teacher ratio, writing support) in order to develop a positive foundation for self-concept enhancement and student engagement in academic writing.

Keywords: academic self-concept, internal and external factors, academic writing

Introduction

Malaysia, once part of the British Empire, achieved its independence in 1957. It has a multicultural, multilingual population of 28.3 million, comprising three main ethnic groups: Malays (53.3%), Chinese (26.0%) and Indians (7.7%). The non-Malay indigenous people make up another 11.8% of the population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2014). Further, the Malays and non-Malay indigenous people together make up the *bumiputera* (natives of the soil) group, which forms the majority group in Malaysia.

During British rule, there was an absence of uniformity within formal education in Malaysia. Thus, the ultimate objective of the education system post-independence was for national unity (Rajendran, 2005), and education was seen as a medium that would facilitate this (Foo & Richards, 2004). The national language was implemented as an official language and as a medium of instruction at all levels of education post-independence. Malay medium primary schools were renamed national schools, and English, Chinese and Tamil schools became national-type schools. While Malay was the language of instruction in national schools, the languages of instruction in national-type schools were English and the vernacular language (Mandarin or Tamil). The national language, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language), was made a compulsory subject in these national-type schools, but English remained as one of the official languages used in the country (Zaaba, Ramadan, Anning, Gunggut, & Umemoto, 2011).

In 2003, English was elevated to the medium of instruction in higher learning institutions due to its “high capital linguistic value” (Gill, 2006, p. 84). Unlike the change in the medium of instruction post-independence in 1957, which was principally driven by nationalistic sentiments, this more recent change in language policy was driven by concerns about globalization (Foo & Richards, 2004) and the development of the “knowledge economy” (Gill, 2006, p. 84). These changes in policy have been identified to contribute to general patterns of dissatisfaction among students, educators, policy makers and the public regarding the teaching and learning of the language

(Che Musa, Koo Yew, & Azman, 2012; Gill, 2006; Hashim, 2009).

As a result of the 2003 policy, most academic literacy courses (i.e., academic writing, reading for academic purposes) in both public and private higher learning institutions were conducted in English. Within the Malaysian tertiary context, academic writing can be perceived as a platform that provides these learners with academic literacy. At this level, learners are taught different types of academic conventions, the incorporation of multiple sources in their writing, the correct acknowledgment of these sources, and engagement in academic criticism. Linguistic features and knowledge of the discipline are also encapsulated in the curricula of academic writing.

Nonetheless, a study by Shafie and Nayan (2011) reported that learners still “struggle to comprehend advanced level reading texts in English...lack reading skills and are not critical readers” (p. 2). This problem also affected their writing skills. Furthermore, the ability to write in English (among Malaysian university students) has been reported as being “not at the most satisfactory level” (Shamsudin & Mahady, 2010, p. 1) and “low proficiency students are still struggling to write” (Puteh, Rahamat, & Karim, 2010, p. 580). Fong, Kim, Stapa and Darus (2009) explained that the “culture of writing in secondary school [in Malaysia] is different from the culture of writing in post-secondary education, making transition [to universities] possibly problematic and intimidating to students” (p. 46).

Since Malaysia has a complex linguistic situation, due to its post-colonial history, the position of English language use is contentious. Rajadurai (2010) found that the meaning represented by the English language and the act of learning English could be interpreted by some Malaysian students as an erosion of their national and cultural identity. Consequently, the cultural conflict represented by English (as a medium of instruction) may result in students’ ambivalence, partial tolerance and resistance, and even absolute rejection of the language and the subject (Canagarajah, 1999). Thus, it is likely that such significant and constant changes in the Malaysian educational context may have an impact on students’ perception and treatment of the language as part of their learning experience, namely their academic self-concepts.

Thus far, research investigating the influences and antecedents of self-concept for language learners are “relatively scarce” (Mercer, 2011a, p. 335). In fact, little information is known about Malaysian learners’ academic self-concept in a specific discipline area. This study aims to address this gap. In particular, it first seeks to identify self-concepts that Malaysian learners have in the context of their Academic Writing (AW) in English. Subsequently, it seeks to identify the influences that shape Malaysian learners’ self-concept in academic writing in order to better understand how such factors impact on Malaysia learners’ engagement in the Academic Writing class. Answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What self-concepts do Malaysian learners’ have in the context of their Academic Writing class?
2. What are the salient influences on Malaysian learners’ self-concept in academic writing?
3. How do these factors impact on Malaysia learners’ engagement in the Academic Writing class?

Literature Review

Deconstructing the Self

The literature from social psychology has drawn a distinction between the *personal self* and the *social self*. This delineation posits that the personal self or individuated self-concept is defined as the person’s sense of unique identity, which is differentiated from others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). This sense of self includes idiosyncrasies and attributes which differentiate the person from others (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). It also “embodies personal history...shapes cognition, and anchors a range of goals, motives, and needs” (Turner & Onorato, 1999, pp. 15-16). The personal self-concept can be identified from statements which are both descriptive (e.g., “I

like writing in English”) and evaluative (e.g., “I always do well in the writing assessments”).

Conversely, the *social self* has been understood as “involving the extension of the self beyond the level of the individual” (Brewer, 1991, p. 476) and a sense of self as connected to the others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The social self is often discussed in tandem with social categories (e.g., ethnicity or gender) and social roles (e.g., student or daughter). The notion of *social self* underlies the connections of the self to the social world. Social self-concept “depersonalizes the self-concept, whereby *I* becomes *we*” (Brewer, 1991, p. 476). Theories relating to socially constructed identity have revealed how personal self-concept and social self-concept (identity) are both contingent in linking cognition, motivation, and behavior (Pierce, 1995; Seta, Schmidt, & Bookhout, 2006). To illustrate, when a learner decides on a particular course of action, he or she may be inclined to associate with groups that share and reinforce similar values.

The fluidity between the *personal* and *social self* has also been discussed extensively in the literature. Brewer and Gardner (1996) propose the notion of social identity “as a reconciliation of opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation from others” (p. 91). In particular, they assert that social identity offers a compromise between self-categorization, since the latter theory has been argued to be either too personalized or too inclusive. The salience of self-representations (personal and social) under social identity provides an explanation of the motivation behind group identification (or non-identification). This can be seen when, as part of the interaction with salient reference groups, there are instances that require self-strategies such as self-enhancement or self-protection (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), self-verification (Hattie, 2003) and self-improvement (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009).

The Academic Self-concept

Bong and Skaalvik (2003) state that self-concept functions in domain-specific terms. This means that there are particular sets of belief which

students hold about themselves in a particular field, subject or area (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). In this study, academic self-concept is defined as “an individual’s perception of competence and their related self-evaluative judgments in the academic domain” (Mercer, 2011b, p. 14). As this study investigates Malaysian learners’ self-concept in academic writing in a second language (L2), the specific domain here is understood to be the “learning of academic writing in L2.” Accordingly, this includes individuals’ self-descriptions of competence and evaluative feelings about themselves as students learning academic writing in L2. This is because the nature of self-concept is understood to be complex and overlaps with other concepts (i.e., self-efficacy, self-belief, and self-perceptions) (Mercer, 2011a, 2011b; Yoshida, 2013).

Early research on academic self-concept such as the study by Marsh (1986) proposed the Internal/External model to represent the comparative processes involved in formulating academic self-concepts. To illustrate, for an external frame of reference for math self-concept, students would “compare their self-perceptions of their own math and verbal abilities with the perceived abilities of other students in their frame of reference” (Marsh, 1986, p. 133). Conversely, for an internal frame of reference, students would form their math self-concept on the basis of their self-concepts in other academic areas.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002) expanded on the notion of internal and external frames of reference and the possible sources of external frames of reference. In their study, social comparison includes processes whereby “a student compares his or her own performance with the perceived performance of another, which may be a comparison group or a comparison person” (p. 234). One pertinent model explaining how social comparison plays a role in the formulation of academic self-concept is the ‘Big-fish-little-pond-effect’ (BFLPE) model (Marsh et al., 2008). This model proposes that students “construct their academic self-concept by comparing their own academic performance with their academic peers” (Wouters, Colpin, Van Damme, & Verschueren, 2013, p. 1). This model has provided the framework for studies (i.e., Dai & Rinn, 2008) documenting the negative effect on

academic self-concept when students are placed in a higher ability group.

Research in academic self-concept has also ascertained that learners' academic self-concepts are influenced by the cues they receive from their environment, specifically in the higher learning context (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Erten & Burden, 2014), the expectations put on them by the institution (Erkman, Caner, Sart, Borkan, & Sahan, 2010; Hu & Kuh, 2002; Powell, 2009), parental involvement and values (Bong, 2008; Fan & Williams, 2010), the artifacts provided by the instructors (Day, Kingtona, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Mornane, 2009), relationships with instructors (Erkman et al., 2010), and relationship with fellow peers (Gest, Rulison, Davidson, & Welsh, 2008; Molloy, Gest, & Rulison, 2011). These findings also underline how the development of self-concept seems to occur in interaction with the environment.

Methodology

The study utilized a mixed methods design, in which priority was given to the qualitative phase. This approach was seen as instrumental in providing comprehensive evidence with regard to factors influencing self-concept in academic writing (in L2). Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches was intended to triangulate data, thus giving the research the rigor, as well as quantitative breadth and qualitative depth. Figure 1 provides a visual model of the sequential investigative procedures for this study. This figure shows the two phases with the respective procedures of data collection and data analysis. This visual model also elucidates the nature of data produced for each phase.

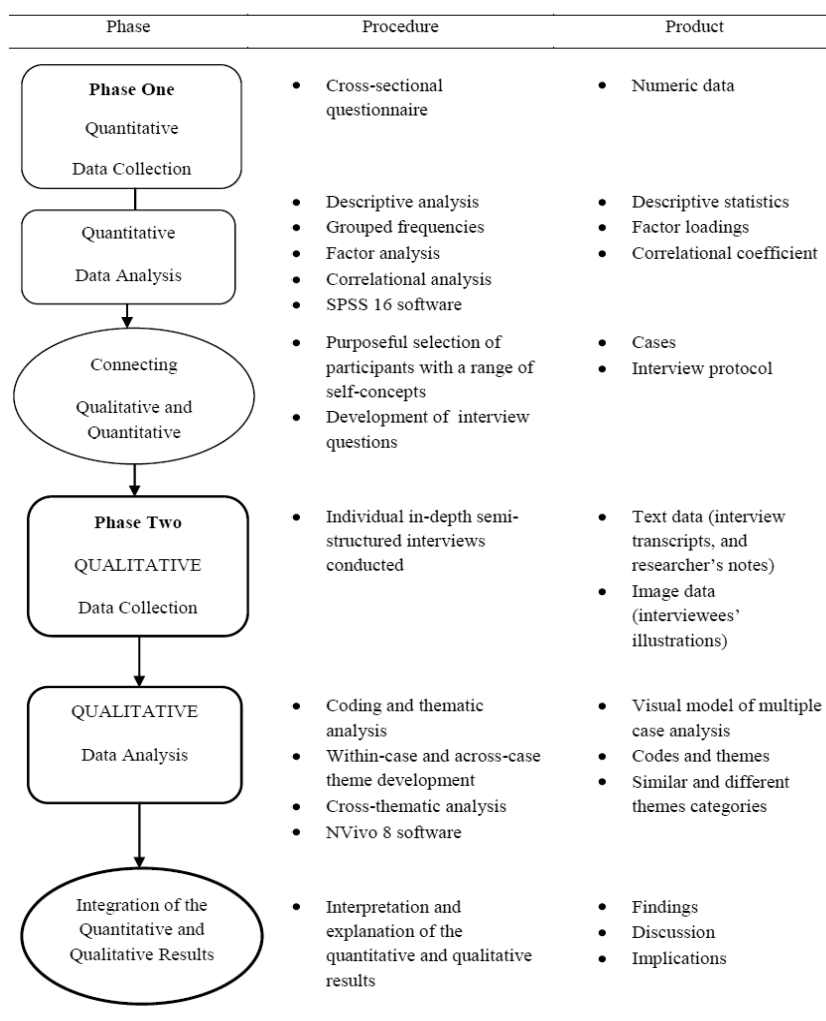


Figure 1. Visual model for the sequential mixed methods procedures. adapted from “Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: From theory to practice” by Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006, Field Methods, 18, p. 16. Copyright by Sage Publications.

Data Collection Tools

Phase One. The first phase of this study utilized a survey questionnaire. As it is widely accepted that research into self-concept needs to be carried out in domain-specific ways (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008), a self-report questionnaire was created specifically to investigate Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing. In doing so, questionnaires which investigated academic self-concept, such as the Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ 1) (Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983), Self-Description Questionnaire II (SDQ II) (Marsh, 1990), and Perception of Ability Scale for Students (PASS) by Boersma and Chapman (1977), were used as references, but more discipline-specific questions were constructed. Section A of the questionnaire contained eight items on demographic information, while Section B contained 18 items on self-concept in academic writing. Responses for the 18 items on self-concept in academic writing were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = False; 4 = True). Self-concept in academic writing was explored through statements such as *I am hopeless when it comes to academic writing* and *I feel confident in my ability to write in English*.

Phase Two. Phase Two of the study utilized face-to-face semi-structured interviews to examine how the learners constructed their self-concept in academic writing. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) maintain that "good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents' perspectives" (p. 104). In the context of this study, interviews afforded the opportunity for capturing unique perspectives of factors that influenced Malaysian learners' self-concepts in academic writing. The interviews were conducted in English and *Bahasa Melayu*, as it was a language in which all were proficient.

Data Analysis Tools

Phase One. The analysis of data in Phase One was done using SPSS16. According to de Vaus (2002) "descriptive statistics summarize patterns in the responses of cases in a sample" (p. 207). It was hoped that descriptive

statistics as a preliminary analysis would uncover patterns and themes for further analysis in the following phase. Since items in the questionnaire include positive and negative statements, the responses for negative statements were reverse-coded in the analysis. For example, the lowest value of the 4-point Likert scale in a positive statement is 1 (False). However, in a negative statement, the value will be 4 (e.g., False = 4, Mostly False = 3, Mostly True = 2, True = 1).

Phase Two. The analysis of data from the semi-structured interviews in Phase Two involved several (not necessarily distinct) steps—namely, transcription, coding, analysis and interpretation. The analysis of data from this qualitative phase was supported by the use of NVivo 8 software. For the qualitative phase, student case studies (Stake, 2000) were utilized. For coding, the steps were subjected to several rounds, and *meaning units* were used that “preserve the psychological integrity of the idea being expressed” and “neither fragment the idea into meaningless truncated segments nor confuse it with other ideas that express different themes” (Ratner, 2002, p. 169). The researcher thus coded coherent, related statements as one meaning unit. In cases where participants combined two themes in one sentence, the researcher coded the sentence twice and each theme was placed in two categories.

Participants and Context

The participants in the first phase of the study were selected with opportunity and convenience taken into account (Bryman, 2008). As the chosen Malaysian university offered the academic writing (AW) course—a course designed to help students with the required academic and language competencies at this higher learning institution—all the students who were currently taking the AW course were invited to participate. There were 199 students enrolled in the AW class in Semester One. The composition of these participants varied in terms of academic years, proficiency levels, and major area of study. The AW students were from different faculties such as,

Economics and Business, Engineering, Computer Science and Information Technology, and Social Science.

Phase One Findings

The descriptive analysis of students' responses to the 18 self-concept items is presented under three subheadings: *self-concept in academic writing*, *self-concept as a writer* and *self-concept in writing in English*. Only statistically significant items under each sub-heading are discussed in the respective sections.

Self-concept in Academic Writing

The 11 statements in this section included how students felt about their academic writing abilities, and how they valued academic writing and the tasks required of them in the AW class. Table 1 presents the distribution of responses for self-concept in academic writing. Four items had high means in this sub-category of self-concept, affirming that the respondents generally had a positive disposition regarding the subject of academic writing.

The findings show considerable consensus among the respondents that it is important for them to do well in academic writing (SC18), as indicated by the 59.4% who responded True (T) and the 38.2% who responded Mostly True (MT) to the statement. This corresponded well with items intended to gauge students' interest in the subject of academic writing, namely Items SC17, SC16 and SC10. The majority of the students seemed to enjoy studying for academic writing (MT = 49.4%; T = 32.9%) and look forward to attending the classes (MT = 50.6%; T = 15.9%).

TABLE 1
Distribution of Responses for Self-concept in Academic Writing

Item	M	Distribution of responses %			
		F	MF	MT	T
SC18 It is important for me to do well in academic writing	3.56	0.6	1.8	38.2	59.4
SC17 I enjoy studying for academic writing	3.10	5.3	12.4	49.4	32.9
SC16 I learn things quickly in my Academic Writing class	2.81	5.9	22.9	55.9	15.3
SC10 I always look forward to my Academic Writing class	2.71	11.2	22.4	50.6	15.9
SC11 Tasks in Academic Writing classes are easy for me	2.26	17.6	45.3	30.6	6.5
SC22 I am hopeless when it comes to academic writing*	2.08	5.3	23.5	44.7	26.5
SC21 Academic writing is easy for me	2.0	23.5	57.1	15.3	4.1

Note. F = False; MF = Mostly False; MT = Mostly True; T = True.

^a Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean. ^b * refers to negatively worded items

Items with the two lowest means in Section B of the questionnaire were represented by Items SC22 and SC21, with a mean value of 2.08 and 2.00, respectively. The majority of the students reported that they were hopeless when it came to academic writing (T = 26.5%; MT = 44.7%). This view was affirmed by Item SC21, where 4.1% students responded True (T) and 15.3% responded Mostly True (MT) to the statement that academic writing was easy for them; meaning that the remaining 80% of the students felt that academic writing was a difficult subject. This was an interesting finding since (despite the reported difficulty) 66% of the students still looked forward to going to the AW class. This finding warranted further investigation in Phase Two of this study. In particular, it was seen as important to identify the factors that contribute to the difficulty of academic writing, and also to examine the reasons why students felt it was important to attend the AW class.

Students' Self-concept as Writers

In order to capture the Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing, it was also necessary to explore their self-concepts as writers in general (other than English). Table 2 presents the sharply juxtaposed findings between the respondents' self-concepts as writers and their perceived ability in academic essay writing.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Responses for Self-concept as a Writer

Item	<i>M</i>	Distribution of responses %			
		F	MF	MT	T
SC20 I find writing essays challenging*	3.35	42.4	51.2	5.9	0.6
SC19 I find writing essays interesting	2.73	7.6	33.5	37.1	21.8
SC15 I have poor writing skills*	2.30	8.8	31.2	41.2	18.8
SC26 I consider myself a good writer	1.98	25.9	53.5	17.6	2.9

Note. F = False; MF = Mostly False; MT = Mostly True; T = True.

^a Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean. ^b * refers to negatively worded items

More than half of the sample reported that writing essays was interesting for them (T = 21.8%; MT = 37.1%) and they did not find writing essays, in general, to be challenging (F = 42.4%; MF = 51.2). Despite the respondents' reported interest in writing, only 2.9% actually reported they considered themselves to be good writers and only 18.8% reported that they had good writing skills. It is probable that learners' self-concept as a writer does not always reflect their self-concept in academic writing (or self-concepts of writing in English). This appears to be supported by responses for Item SC20 in which only 0.6% reported they found writing essays to be challenging. This finding warranted further investigation in the subsequent qualitative phase of this study, highlighting that it would be valuable to explore the relationship of these juxtaposed responses.

Students' Self-concept of Writing in English

Items SC24, Item SC12 and Item SC23 were aimed at gauging the respondents' self-concept of writing in English in a non-academic context. Table 3 shows the distribution of their responses.

TABLE 3
Distribution of Responses for Self-concept of Writing in English

Item	<i>M</i>	Distribution of responses %			
		F	MF	MT	T
SC24 I make a lot of mistakes when writing in English*	2.86	22.9	47.6	21.8	7.6
SC12 I like writing in English	2.81	7.6	25.3	45.9	21.2
SC23 I feel confident in my ability to write in English	2.55	10.6	38.8	35.3	15.3

Note. F = False; MF = Mostly False; MT = Mostly True; T = True

^a Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean ^b * refers to items negatively worded items.

The majority of the students reported they like writing in English (MT = 45.9%; T = 21.2 %) for Item SC12. Nonetheless, the students responded False (22.9%) and Mostly False (47.6%) to the statement, *I make a lot of mistakes when writing in English*. It is likely that despite students' preference for the English language, they lack confidence in their writing abilities. The division in responses could be attributed to the respondents' interpretation of their grammatical accuracy in writing and may also have strong links to proficiency issues.

Overall, Phase One results raised several critical issues with regard to the first research question, which aimed to identify what self-concepts are pertinent in the context of the students' academic writing. The theme that emerged from the analysis was that students' self-concept in academic writing was influenced by their writing skills, writing abilities, and writing

strategies, and therefore (in this phase) these challenges seem to be proficiency-based. There were variations in responses within the sub-sections of the questionnaire suggesting that within a similar academic self-concept domain (e.g., self-concept in academic writing) there are distinctions within students' other self-concepts.

Phase Two Findings

The questionnaire results informed and guided the data collection in the qualitative phase of this study. Interviews were carried out with eight student participants. However, this current article will only report the data from four learners. The learners reported in this article are Nurul, Ahmad, Maya, and Siew Lee (pseudonyms) (see Table 4). The four students were selected as they represented a range of perspectives of self-concepts from Phase One. With the exception of Ahmad, all the participants were in their second year of university. Their pathways to the university varied. Ahmad and Nurul entered university through completion of Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examinations (in Form 5); while Siew Lee and Maya entered the university upon completing the Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) in Form 6. Consequently, the duration of their previous English instruction varied too.

TABLE 4
Demographic Information

Name	Nurul	Ahmad	Maya	Siew Lee
Age	20	19	21	22
Year Level	Second Year	First Year	Second Year	Second Year
Faculty	Faculty of Science	Faculty of Science	Faculty of Social Science	Faculty of Science
Major	Info. Technology	Biotechnology	Human Resource	Zoology
First Language	Malay	Malay	Malay	Chinese
Previous English Instruction	12 years • Standard 1-6 at primary school • Form 1-5 at secondary school • Pre-University	12 years • Standard 1-6 at primary school • Form 1-5 at secondary school • Pre-University	13 years • Standard 1-6 at primary school • Form 1-6 at secondary school	14 years • Standard 1-6 at primary school • Transition School ¹ • Form 1-5 • Form 6 ² at secondary school

Influences linked to the internal factors, which appear to be central to learners' self-concept in academic writing will be discussed first, followed by external factors.

English Self-concept

All the learners reported their English self-concepts when discussing self-concept in academic writing. Ahmad, Maya and Siew Lee demonstrated their

¹ Transitional classes are aimed at preparing students from vernacular medium schools (i.e., Chinese and Tamil) for secondary studies in a national school, where the Malay language is used as a medium of instruction.

² Form Six consists of Upper six and Lower six (2 years) and uses English as a medium of instruction.

inclination towards the English language for various reasons. The fact that the majority of these students (except Maya–Humanities) were based in the Sciences (e.g., Biotechnology and Zoology), and that they had all learned Science and Mathematics in English in secondary school (2 years) and pre-university levels (1 to 2 years) may explain the inclination. Ahmad explained his inclination, “...because we have been taught Science and Maths in English since Form 4...the resources for Biotech are in English and it’s hard to translate [into Malay language]” (Ahmad, Interview 1). In this current study, the fact that the majority of the students were in the Sciences, and thus, the medium of instruction was English, and their learning resources (e.g., textbook and research articles) were mainly in English, may provide partial explanation for their inclination towards English, and by extension their self-concept in academic writing.

Nonetheless, there were instances where English self-concept had negatively impacted on self-concept in academic writing. To illustrate, comments such as “Why do I need to learn English? I don’t see the point” (Nurul, Interview 1) appears to exert a significant impact on Nurul’s formulation of self-concept in academic writing (i.e., “As long as it [AW tasks] is completed...done...I don’t really care”) (Nurul, Interview 1). The conflict in Nurul’s case may also be due to the fact that she was unable to identify with the aims of the AW class or the objectives of the institution. Consequently, this conflict influenced her engagement and further shaped her self-concept in the AW class in a negative manner (i.e., her reported procrastination and trivializing of learning AW in L2). Since Nurul did not express any sense of affiliation with the English language, this appeared to exert a strong negative influence on her self-concept in academic writing.

Beliefs about Language Learning

Beliefs about language learning were also a significant factor in shaping learners’ self-concept in academic writing. Comments such as “If I am really hard working, it [academic writing skills] will be improved” (Siew Lee,

Interview 1), and “I took AW because it is useful for my future. All the things, all the lectures in the academic writing paper are useful for my future and for now” (Maya, Interview 1) reflect how these beliefs positively shaped the learners’ self-concept in academic writing. These findings also highlight how, despite the reported difficulties of learning AW, their beliefs about language learning aligned them with a particular set of mastery-oriented goals, and afforded a greater amount of persistence when facing those difficulties. Note that the majority of the students reported that learning academic writing in English was challenging, due not only to proficiency issues but also to the perception that academic writing was a foreign subject to them. Nonetheless, these students persevered and were also optimistic about possible improvement in the near future. Most of the students exhibited the following attributes during the course of learning academic writing. The first is persistence: “In my opinion it [AW] is difficult to start, but after we write a little bit more and learn more about it, it is actually quite easy” (Ahmad, Interview 1); (2) resourcefulness: “[When faced with a complicated writing task] I think I will go and see my supervisor and seek for advice” (Siew Lee, Interview 1); and (3) resilience: “I got a D [for academic writing]...So I am taking another English class to repair my grades” (Maya, Interview 1).

Ahmad’s beliefs about language learning were further reflected through his optimism regarding the development of his self-concept in academic writing. Despite challenges that he still faced with English grammar and vocabulary, Ahmad believes that his current self-concept may further develop through the accumulation of knowledge and skills gained from appropriate exposure to AW. He explained, “*I think I would change* [from average to good] because after taking the academic writing course, it gives me more confidence to read and write in English because I have the skills to extract the information from the text and how to write in a proper way (Ahmad, Interview 2). Ahmad’s beliefs about language learning appear to be underlined by the principle that states that the earlier the introduction and contact is made with the target language, the better the acquisition of the second language, including writing skills.

The Influence of Academic Writing Perceptions

Students interacting with the subject of academic writing recounted the need for extended cognitive skills for example, Siew Lee, Maya, and Nurul depicted English as a new and “foreign subject”. Siew Lee who described herself as “poor and anxious” in academic writing explained, “I seldom do this type of writing” (Siew Lee, Interview 1). She also stated later on that the rules and conventions overwhelmed her: “It’s the rules...it is quite difficult to follow sometimes” (Siew Lee, Interview 1). Such perceptions regarding AW could be attributed to the fact that the students were not exposed to such conventions during their secondary schooling years. Maya explained: “Initially I didn’t know what AW was...it is all about what I need have do in university...everything was taught in this class...I mean, how to write report, APA referencing style, how to write a good article, how to create the language (Maya, Interview 2). Nurul further explained her perception about academic writing:

There was a very big difference [between writing in school and writing in university]. In school we are told to write essays about something. But in university, the first thing I had to do was write a report. I didn’t even know what a report was. It has its own format, its own language. (Nurul, Interview 1)

That academic writing was taught in English also shaped the learners’ self-concept in academic writing. This was particularly evident in Siew Lee’s case. She explained: “My English is not so good...so when it comes to really formal writing you really need a good vocabulary, and [to be] precise. So that becomes a problem” (Siew Lee, Interview 1). This complexity appears to be exacerbated in Nurul’s case, who already presented very strong resistance to the English language. She disclosed her frustrations regarding the academic writing conventions, “Why do I have to write based on all the characteristics? Why is there so many? Why does it have to be complicated” (Nurul, Interview 1).

The Influence of Past Institutions

The students in this study have come from various educational backgrounds and institutions. Consequently, their learning experiences with regard to English and writing in English in particular, may vary depending on the L2 position in the previous school and its learning culture. For example, studying in a national school allowed Ahmad to have a *Guru Cemerlang* (subject matter expert) as his English instructor, and this appeared to have helped him to improve his English. On the other hand, studying in a Chinese-medium school may have influenced Siew Lee's English proficiency level. She explained, "The teacher does not use much English to talk to us. Since the teacher is Chinese, it is easier for us to communicate in Chinese" (Siew Lee, Interview 1). As a result, there were limited opportunities for Siew Lee to improve her English proficiency. This raises the issue of whether the type of educational institution at secondary level in Malaysia could actually be detrimental to, or enhance, students' self-concepts.

As mentioned previously, students in this study who said academic writing was challenging, also seemed to suggest a mismatch between the skills students brought to university from their secondary school experience. Maya explained, "What I learnt in secondary it's too basic...maybe I have learnt only 20%. So what I studied in secondary didn't really help me in university" (Maya, Interview 1). Although it can be argued that this mismatch could be attributed to the different writing cultures (see Harklau, 2006) of the two institutions, Maya's views seem to suggest a lack of preparation and awareness from the prior institution regarding writing requirements for university. The lack of emphasis on academic writing in prior institutions may play a critical role in influencing students' self-concepts in academic writing.

The Lasting Influence of National Educational Policies

The students experienced several policy changes with regards to the use of

English as a medium of instruction during their academic studies. The inconsistencies of the medium of instruction between the past and present learning institution, in particular, appear to have influenced students' self-concept in academic writing. Understandably, the policy changes were met with mixed responses. Some students were able to adapt with ease, while others struggled. This struggle was evident in students' comments such as the following: "Actually it was not easy to adjust" (Maya, Interview 1), and "All the changes [in language of instruction] were very hard" (Ahmad, Interview 1). The changes to the language of instruction used in the academic setting may have caused disruption to learners' present academic self-concept. This type of disruption has been reported in the literature as challenging (Johnson & Nozick, 2011), and it may affect an individual's overall sense of well-being (Usborne & Taylor, 2010).

There were also students who embraced these changes. Although Siew Lee's prior learning experience in a Chinese medium school (Form 1-5) was marred by the lack of opportunity to use English, her later engagement with (basic) academic writing for two years in Lower and Upper Form 6 (English is the medium of instruction in Lower Six and Upper Six), appeared to have provided her with the necessary writing schema and resources for her university studies. It is probable that Siew Lee's acceptance of all the changes in educational policies was manifested in her positive attitude towards academic writing in English.

It is also probable that the educational policies in which English as a medium of instruction was implemented to cope with globalization (Hashim, 2009; Mohamed, 2008; Yaacob et al., 2011), could explain why the students had to accommodate the changes (which consequently influenced their self-concept in academic writing). Due to the educational policies, self-enhancement in English may have been perceived as necessary by Siew Lee, Ahmad and Maya. The findings from the current study indicate the ways in which educational policies can influence self-concept in academic writing. The impact also appears to vary from one student to another.

The Influence of the Present Institutional Context

Students' interactions within their present institution also played an important role in influencing self-concept in academic writing. In particular, the highly academic environment in which the students are may provide further cues to the centrality of academic writing at higher learning institutions. Siew Lee reported she "took AW because it is useful for my future...All the things, all the lectures in the AW paper are useful" (Siew Lee, Interview 2). This suggests that context (e.g., university or the AW class context) may promote (and perhaps enforce) certain salient identities. For example, there is the 'autonomous' university student in Siew Lee (e.g., "It [writing improvement] depends on me. If I am really hard working, it will be improved" [Siew Lee, Interview 1]), and the 'novice' academic writer in Ahmad (e.g., "it [AW] is difficult to start, but after we write a little bit more and learn more about it, it is actually quite easy" [Ahmad, Interview 1]). These identities are then internalized into students' self-concepts. The findings regarding salient identities promoted by the academic context in this study parallel the findings by Stoner, Perrewé and Munyon, (2011) who stated that "identities are evoked only when there is a situational pressure to do so (or a possible reward for enacting such identity)" (p. 98).

In Siew Lee's case, the reward might have been her increased knowledge of the language and also the transference of the skills gained from the AW class to her other content papers. She reported that the discussions in her AW class provided her with the vocabulary that would be useful in her final year project. These 'rewards' appear to shape her self-concept in academic writing. Thus, it appears that students' interaction with the AW subject in a favorable environment could help facilitate a positive self-concept in academic writing.

Ahmad recounted a career seminar that he attended at university which highlighted the need for graduates to have good communication skills. Ahmad explained:

That was the moment I thought to myself...I must change. There is

another thing you have to have. Even if you get four flat [4.0 Cumulative Grade Point Average], if you do not have what the employer wants from you - you will not be an employable person. (Ahmad, Interview 1)

This realization of what was needed to enter the job market was a critical incident which changed Ahmad's perception of academic achievement and this appeared to have reaffirmed his conviction of the need to change and improve. The examples in this section show how the present institutional context exerted its influence on his current academic self-concept. Based on this realization, Ahmad recognized that he needed to take action and work towards acquiring the skills that would make him attractive to potential employers. He explained, "So I try my best to activate myself...not just become a passive student and stay in my room and study. You have to be more active" (Ahmad, Interview 1). His resolution for self-improvement and his need to reduce the discrepancy between his present self and his ideal future self was thus manifested in his actions, not only behaviorally but also affectively and cognitively. Ahmad's case highlighted how one's personal self-concept can be amenable to change when triggered by the right catalyst.

Social Comparison

The findings of the study revealed that self-concept in academic writing was also influenced through social comparisons with other individuals, as well as feedback and appraisal gained from the interaction. Siew Lee's "support system" (Siew Lee, Interview 2) at university also positively influenced her self-concept in academic writing. These peers consisted of senior students and classmates who provided her with encouragement and sometimes the "telling off" (Siew Lee, Interview 2) that she needed to keep her focused on her studies. To illustrate, when Siew Lee complained to her friends about having to read such long materials, her peers helped remind her of her position and responsibility as a student. "They would give me advice

saying, although you don't like it—you still have to do it. So don't waste your time and start reading!" (Siew Lee, Interview 2). *Since* her friends were highly motivated and studious, Siew Lee emulated similar behavior, as this appeared to be expected in the norms of the group (the importance of hard work and doing well in studies).

An individual's interpretation of social comparison can also be very subjective. To illustrate, Nurul recollected an event in her secondary school days which occurred during one of the assemblies:

The principal said you are the chosen ones [selected to study in a fully residential school]. That made me feel very small among the other cleverer students...especially when you hear other students speaking fluently. So I didn't want to talk...because I felt my English was so low...I refrained from talking and that caused my confidence to worsen. (Nurul, Interview 1)

By making social comparisons with other students who were more proficient in the school, Nurul's self-concept in the language appeared to have suffered a significant blow. The detrimental impact on her English self-concept was further augmented in her university years. Nurul explained, "Now, when I see instructors, I don't feel confident when speaking, because I will wonder whether she or he will understand me. Because of the low confidence, I will avoid seeing the instructor" (Interview 1).

Conversely, Ahmad was impacted positively by social comparison. When asked about his early student life in secondary school, he recollected that he was a different person then: "In school, I was not very active. I was quite passive. I didn't participate in a lot of activities. If there were activities in school, I would not get involved" (Interview 1). During his two years in the science stream (Form 4 and Form 5), Ahmad, however, gradually became more studious. In particular, the expectations on students in that stream seemed to be an influencing factor in the development of his positive sense of self. He explained as follows:

When I moved to Form 4 and Form 5, and when you are in the science stream, people say that you have to be good students. You have to be smart and you have to improve yourself in many subjects...and you have to be better and compete with other people. (Ahmad, Interview 1)

Although he did not clarify who the “other people” were, the contextual influence of social comparison seemed to have impacted on Ahmad positively. By comparing his academic achievement with the achievement of his peers in the science stream classes, Ahmad appeared to have formulated a new academic self-concept. It is also likely that the prestige that comes with being in the science stream facilitated the change in his academic self-concept. It appears that social comparison may have served a different purpose (other than purely evaluative), which is self-enhancement (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) or self-improvement (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). This is evidenced by Ahmad’s case whose academic self-concept appeared to thrive when placed in a higher ability group.

Discussion

In this study, the student is central with multiple influences coming from external sources (present institution, past institution, Malaysia’s educational policies and social comparisons) and internal sources (English self-concepts, beliefs about language learning, other internalized self-concepts, and academic writing perceptions). These influences impact on students’ self-concepts in academic writing and appear to stem from the amalgamation of learners’ past, present and anticipated future learning experiences. The internal and external factors also appear to be interrelated in shaping each other, and do not appear to function in isolation.

Salient internal and external influences appear to be contingent on the social changes that students face as part of the process of moving into a new academic setting. As the learners reflected during the study on what was

necessary for them to be successful in the learning experience, they reported that selective changes were made in their self-concepts in academic writing. To illustrate, Siew Lee and Ahmad identified themselves with certain groups and networks of students, who share, influence and reinforce individual identities. Therefore, it is probable that when learners are placed into a new setting, they have to reflect on and re-evaluate their abilities in order to adapt to internal and situational changes. Thus, it is also likely that “advancing one or more self-domains” became a necessity (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009, p. 2). In this new setting, the learners’ self-concept may also be questioned or reinforced as “part of the active restructuring of the *ecology of the self*” (Hormuth, 1990, p. 5). Note that Hormuth maintains that the self is continuously challenged by elements (i.e., people, environment and objects) within the ecology. This may result in learners “making selective use of new elements that can enhance the existing concept of the self” (p. 5). This carries resemblance to the findings reported by Jackson (2008) in that learner’s self-concepts were found to be significantly affected by the social environments posed by second language classrooms, especially as learners transition from secondary school to university.

The findings of this study also reveal that the relationship between self-concept and engagement in academic writing appears to be altered by the balance of internal and external factors within the ecology of self-concept in academic writing of any individual student. In particular, the ecology allowed students to compensate when particular internal or external factors are not available or are not as strong. To illustrate, Siew Lee’s reported “average” English proficiency appeared to have impeded her ability to engage in the AW class. However, at the same time she had a network of peers which appeared to propel and sustain her self-concept, and hence, her engagement in the AW class. Siew Lee also actively sought help from her instructor which in turn, boosted her cognitive engagement in the AW class. Therefore, it is probable that the relationship between self-concept and engagement in Siew Lee’s case provides information and feedback, to assist internal and external factors to be balanced in a complementary fashion.

It also appears that the particular levels of various internal and/or external factors that are available to individual students may influence how learners operate. This was particularly evident in the example of Ahmad, who drew from, and was guided by, the energizing properties of his self-concept in academic writing (e.g., “I activated myself” [Interview 1]), and his engagement in the AW class (e.g., “I read a lot of academic writing, books and journals that are related to my academic field” [Interview 1]). He identified appropriate learning strategies, set realistic goals, and consequently, he engaged positively in the AW class. As the social (e.g., his peers and family) and educational context in which he was in (e.g., instructor and institutional aims) also put great emphasis on academic importance, these factors may have further facilitated and nurtured the plausibility of his future self (Lee, McInerney, Liem, & Ortega, 2010; Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). It is therefore probable that the desired learning outcomes may be contingent on the proportionate availability of both internal and external factors, and whether goals are aligned with the balance within their ecologies of self-concept and subsequently, engagement in academic writing.

Indeed, the proportions of various factors that are available within the self-concept in academic writing ecology appear to be crucial in facilitating learners to reach their desired goals of academic literacy and academic legitimacy. However, this may also be contingent on the nature of self-concept and engagement itself. If both constructs are positive, the outcomes tend to be desirable, such as improved academic learning or academic achievement and legitimacy (as an L2 academic writer), in addition to empowerment within the students’ learning experience (e.g., Ahmad, Siew Lee and Maya). On the other hand, a negative self-concept in academic writing may tend to foster lower levels of engagement, such as in the case of Nurul. Therefore, it can be argued that a healthy, positive balance between self-concept in academic writing and student engagement in the AW class will probably facilitate the learners’ academic and social integration into tertiary learning. This supports the findings of other research in which negative self-concepts in students tend to lead to poorer adjustment in the

academic setting (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Johnson & Nozick, 2011).

Learners may also integrate internal and external factors differently into their self-concept. This was depicted by the contrasting influences of authority figures in the cases of Ahmad and Nurul. In Ahmad's case, a talk by a motivational speaker impacted positively, and this influenced him to take a more proactive approach to his AW learning. Unlike Ahmad, a motivational speech during a school assembly impacted Nurul negatively. The notion of the *pragmatic self*, suggested by Kivetz and Tyler (2007) seems to offer a plausible explanation. They argue that the pragmatic self "is guided by the practicality of actions and is focused on opportunities, resources, and other types of means that may be useful at the present moment" (p. 196). In the context of this study, students' pragmatic self appeared to be activated through learning demands and the availability of learning opportunities and resources in the higher learning institution. Ahmad's competence in L2 and his enhanced ability to participate in the AW class seemed to shape his self-concept in a positive manner. Conversely, limited English proficiency and a negative English self-concept appear to have negatively shaped Nurul's self-concept in academic writing.

These findings coincide with those of Mercer (2011b), who maintained that internal and external factors of self-concept formulation "could be seen as artificial separation" (p. 97). This current study appears to affirm that self-concept in academic writing is contingent on both internal and external factors and how these interact in the formulation of students' self-concept in academic writing. The case studies also illuminate how, despite having similar external and internal factors shaping their self-concept in academic writing, individual learners may still respond differently.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that self-concept in academic writing is influenced by multiple internal and external factors that are unique to the context in which the learners are embedded. The first phase of the study, which utilized a questionnaire, revealed the multifaceted nature of self-concept in academic writing (i.e., self-concept in English, self-concept as a writer). In the second phase, the case studies revealed a number of internal and external factors which shaped individual self-concepts in academic writing. The case studies also brought to light the possibility of a diverse range of responses among students having similar (external and internal) factors within the ecology of self-concept in academic writing.

Learning a new subject such as AW in a second language, in a new setting, can be a demanding experience. The students' overall academic achievement, academic legitimacy and job prospects are also contingent on the language proficiency and the communicative skills learned from the AW class. However, learning academic writing in L2 does not have to be an isolated process. The study has ascertained that there are multiple external and internal factors that could influence self-concept in academic writing and engagement in a positive way. These factors include the quality of interaction students have with peers and instructors, and the existence of a network of support in the form of peers and senior students. Such factors may also compensate for other areas in which individuals may not be as strong.

The findings of this study have important implications for instructors in the AW class. Since they have the most frequent and proximal contact with students in the AW class, instructors play a critical role in shaping both learners' self-concepts in academic writing and their engagement in the class. In this study, some students perceived their participation in the AW class was impeded by their inadequate English proficiency level. This, in turn, impacted on how they valued the AW class. Therefore, instructors need to make it explicit to the students that the course objectives are aimed at the students' academic literacy development and are also designed for them to

gain necessary academic writing skills that are transferable to other subjects. Clarifying the learning outcomes explicitly to the students throughout the AW tasks and activities, and also prior to enrolling, would provide students with clear expectations and a sense of purpose in learning AW.

There is also a need to provide a supportive educational environment in order to develop a positive foundation for self-concept enhancement and student engagement. The findings of the study have revealed that students face various challenges in learning academic writing in L2. These challenges were not limited to language concerns (e.g., grammar and vocabulary); they also included other writing aspects (e.g., organization, academic writing conventions, stylistic issues). These different issues call for constructive, personalized and informative feedback to be provided for individual learners. Therefore, institutions need to invest in a form of ongoing support in which students' individualized needs can be addressed. Individualized attention should address issues such as unclear expectations for writing tasks, anxiety due to a lack of proficiency, and social peer comparisons.

This research is important in that it contributes to an understanding of the influences of academic self-concept for second language learners, in particular, those from a developing country such as Malaysia. The internal and external factors have been highlighted within the context of literacy and other processes of individual development and socialization, which are unique to the Malaysian context.

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