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BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN LANGUAGES: AN EARLY-CAREER BILINGUAL ACADEMIC'S WRITING ODYSSEY

Abstract:

Many academics can produce successful texts in both English and another language, and move back and forth between languages. In this paper, I present an auto-ethnography regarding my experience of writing in L2 and the impact of going back to write academically in my L1. The paper is a reflection on the main constraints I had on expressing my authorial identity and position as an academic. I will focus on moving back to write in my first language and the personal-professional impact this is causing me in producing academic texts in the context of my home country. The reflection is documented with entries from my academic writing diaries, introspection techniques, text analysis of some extracts of my writing and sections from an interview with a colleague. As a researcher in L2 academic writing and identity, I am aware of the processes involved in writing in an L2 and in the shaping of the writer's authorial identity; however, the process of reflecting upon myself is a challenge. The paper closes with a reflection on the utility of reporting an auto-ethnographic study in a reflection paper.

Keywords: academic writing ♦ bilingual writer ♦ early career academic

I never really consciously thought of the importance of having a place to write, a space where you feel inspired and writing flows, until a serious writing block I had during my PhD studies. It was November of 2014, and I was one year away from submitting my PhD thesis. Back then, I was living in Lancaster, England. There is no distraction as it is a small lovely city, and the constant refreshing rain gives us green fields which inspire you while you are nicely cosy doing your research. Despite all this beauty, I found that I could not write. I knew what I wanted to say; I had all the resources, I had the time, but I could not possibly write. Dressed in my winter hiking outfit, I grabbed my rucksack, packing in my laptop, my PhD supervision notebook, and a couple of books I considered pillars for my study. I headed to Bunessan, a small village in the Ross of Mull,

in the Scottish Isles—a remote place, with no internet or mobile connection, only one community bus, and very few inhabitants, many of whom seemed to be away during the dark winter months. Unplugged from the world, that was the setting for my first writing retreat.

Under these circumstances, I felt at home communicating in English, and living in an English world. I believe I only needed to find a place of my own. The UK context is of my entire comfort, to the point that I still call it home. In this first retreat I not only found my own space, but also found myself. This was a crucial point in personal and professional growth which definitely impacted my writer's identity. The writing up of my thesis was very enjoyable afterwards and took place in different spots, from campus up to some other remote locations. I became aware of the importance of one's own room, physical and mental. However, once I finished my PhD, I had to move to Mexico, my home country. The reason for moving back to Mexico was to comply with my duty to my PhD sponsor, i.e., return to Mexico to support the development of the nation with the knowledge acquired during the degree. Here, in Mexico, I do not find myself. The so-called *reverse culture shock* has indeed shown its effects in many aspects of life, both personal and professional (Gaw 2000). I am in an unfamiliar and yet familiar country, a completely different physical and geographical space, with different politics and social and cultural dimensions, where English is a foreign language and where I am facing a new challenge: writing in Spanish, my L1.

In the Mexican education system, the Secretary of Public Education (SEP), sometimes referred to as the Ministry of Education, is the main educative institution for the nation. Public schools and universities are evaluated by this office. As the national language in Mexico is Spanish, if a lecturer at a university wants to belong to the PRODEP (*Programa para el desarrollo del Personal Docente del tipo superior*), the national distinction for quality work as a lecturer and researcher in Higher Education in Mexico, the official papers have to be written in Spanish. Some institutions, despite being bilingual educative centres, also require all official papers in Spanish. However, since I work in a languages department, I am given the option to choose the language of my publications. I have always written my papers in English because of the nature of my discipline and particularly because I feel personally more connected with writing in English. This is probably an influence of my training at English-language institutions of higher education. However, as a member of the university, we are required to belong to academic groups and sometimes these groups are interdisciplinary, involving, for example, language department staff and members from linguistics or education. The language choice for these groups is to communicate and write in Spanish. The members of these groups are Mexican, and they seem to feel more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue, Spanish. They would only switch into a different language (or switch back and forth) if a member of the community does not speak Spanish.

In my new (and former) academic context, I have to negotiate my academic identity. Ivanič (1998) declares a writer can portray many identities in a piece of writing. That is, the individual brings within him / herself several roles that influence their identity being exposed in their writing. So far, I have let my readers know I am an academic, a female, an L2-English speaker, and Mexican. A writer's identity is then understood as the expression of the *self* in a piece of writing. Since the writing I have been concerned with is that used in academia, I am talking about academic writing identity, and more specifically authorial identity. My research area is on L2 academic writing and identity, and the fact that I am an L2-writer of English, studying and experiencing my own evolution as a writer, makes this research process more interesting.

Taking this into account, I can clearly see that my current writing in Spanish is influenced by my academic writing background in English, and by the fact that my discipline itself is L2 writing research. For example, in closing an email to colleagues, I usually find myself formulating Spanish translations for English expressions (e.g., rendering *looking forward to hearing from you* in the literal *espero oír de ustedes*). This is not a standard way to close an email in Mexico, nor in Spanish more generally.

Since the process is a personal experience, where moving between culture(s) has had an effect on writing production, I find auto-ethnography the most appropriate method with which to approach my study. Auto-ethnography, as defined by Ellis et al. (2011) is “an approach to research and writing that systematically analyses (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act” (273). I then first discuss my understanding of *auto-ethnography* and *authorial identity*, followed by my background as an L2 writer, an account of the tensions in moving back to writing in Spanish, and a reflection on the constraints on expressing my writer's authorial identity.

Auto-ethnography and authorial identity

In auto-ethnography, one uses past experiences documented through retrospection, journals, recordings, photographs, and interviews that help with recalling an experience. Often the experiences reported in autobiography are epiphanies, moments of significant impact in one's life, life-changing events, or existential crises (Ellis et al. 2011). Ethnography deals with the research of cultural practice (e.g., values, beliefs, social aspects) with the aim to facilitate understanding(s) of the culture. From my experiences, I am aware that conflicts about language choice and the need to move from one to another in an academic context are familiar struggles for many bilingual academics. When I informally talk about my feelings with former colleagues who are now in similar situations, being early career researchers back in their home country, we share similar feelings. It is my feeling that there has not been much formal discussion about this in academic

research, so this personal reflection is helping me to understand this apparently common, and yet undiscussed phenomenon beyond social networks.

As an L2-writing researcher, I am conscious that a writer's identity is constantly evolving (Ivanič 1998), and that factors such as the writer's native language culture, scholarly background and the discipline influence the realisation of the text itself (Fløttum 2012). I am particularly analysing authorial identity since this is the aspect of identity that authors develop when writing academically. *Authorial identity* is the expression of the academic self, how the writer portrays and positions him / herself within the academic community.

My native language culture is Mexican Spanish, but since my Bachelor's degree I have developed my entire career in English, first as a foreign language while in Mexico, and then as a L2 in the UK. I am an L2-writing scholar who now needs to move back and forth between English and Spanish. Nonetheless, if an option of language is given, I will always choose to write in English. The call for this special issue invited authors to write in languages others than English or a combination of languages. In my case, I never questioned the language I would write it in. It had to be in English even if I talk about my past and present experiences in Spanish. This, I believe, is still a strong aspect of my writer's identity.

Most early career researchers (ECRs) start developing their authorial identity in their first solo publications, which commence around the time they complete their doctorate. As I am experiencing this process, I think my reflection in this analytical auto-ethnography could contribute to the understanding of the social phenomena other ECRs experience.

A sense of my academic (bilingual) self

To initiate my introspection into my identity as an L2-writer who researches L2-writers' identity, I asked a colleague at Lancaster University to interview me. While I provided the initial questions to structure the interview, her expertise and familiarity with my research and how I have evolved as a writer and academic prompted reflection during and after the interview.

One of the initial questions of the interview was why I decided to study a PhD in the United Kingdom. My answer as transcribed reads:

I've been doing research all the time in English in academic writing, and applied linguistics and I love linguistics, and the academics I was reading were based in Lancaster University. In addition, the few PhD programmes in Mexico in my area are on pure linguistics, and in Spanish. My entire career has been in languages and applied linguistics. I just felt Lancaster University was the place.

Reflecting on these lines, I can clearly see that my desire to become an Applied Linguist led me into doing it in English. It was the unavailability of such a programme in Mexico which brought me into the English world, both academically and literally, when living in Lancaster. After my studies, I do not particularly enjoy talking about Applied Linguistics in Spanish. It feels unnatural to discuss my research and / or Applied linguistics concepts in Spanish. I believe though I can contribute back in Mexico with ideas for the construction of Applied Linguistics programmes in Spanish, but it should be done as group work, as I am certain I still need to learn much of the context.

I must admit that I have always felt identified with English; it is perhaps a metaphorical place for me. Thus, it was a very welcome decision to do Applied Linguistics in English. My identification with English also results, in part, from my education. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Modern Languages, with a specialisation in English (Mexico), an MA in Applied Linguistics (Mexico), an MRes and a PhD in Applied Linguistics (UK). Despite the fact that I did my BA and MA in Mexico, my papers and dissertations¹ were written in English as was appropriate for my study programmes. The institutional context of my BA was a public university while the institutional context of my MA was that of a private university. The latter was a US American University based in Mexico, and 90% of my lecturers were a range of foreigners. This started me on a long process of getting closer to other cultures, even if I was still in my home country. I also noticed my academic writing practices and my own writer's identity started to evolve. I became aware of the *writer's identity* concept and started to assimilate it while doing my Master's studies. What initiated this process? Was it the new context, the space, the people? Or perhaps the fact I was doing a postgraduate degree, and encountering deeper reflection on new concepts? Writing my assignments in the Master's, I had a sense of freedom to express what I wanted, and in the language of my choice. We were given the option to write the dissertation in English or Spanish, but there was no doubt for me it was to be in English. My lectures were in English, my lecturers were foreigners, my readings were in English, and I had written my Bachelor's dissertation in English. I felt somehow empowered writing in English. Thus, I happily wrote my Master's thesis in English.

In this period of my life I presented at my first international conference at the Symposium of Second Language Writing, held in Arizona State University, USA. My introduction to and interaction with the specialists in my disciplinary community were so welcoming and engaging that I decided to enroll myself in a PhD abroad, and within the area of writer identity. Since Roz Ivanič's (1998) work was an inspiring revelation to me, I decided to apply to Lancaster University, in the UK. I had no idea she had retired by then, but to my surprise I was welcomed to the Literacy

¹ In the UK context a thesis is written at a PhD level and a dissertation at MA and BA levels; this distinction is opposite to the American context where a dissertation is written by a PhD and thesis by MA and BA. The Mexican context uses the word 'thesis' for all levels. In this paper, I am labelling them as in the UK context.

Research and Discussion Group once I became a PhD student there. This space gave me the opportunity to share my research, listen to others' work, and meet Roz, every now and then. I feel I have a space in this research community even now that I have graduated and I am not longer physically there.

Thus far, I seem to have narrated my romantic relationship with Applied Linguistics in English. Little did I know back then that this was going to take me away from Spanish, at least in academia. Now that I am back in Mexico, it seems that as an academic I am running away from my L1. I am constantly insisting on communication—in emails, meetings, reading groups—in English. I defend this choice by explaining that the nature of our discipline is English Language Teaching, and we have to be the example for our students in modelling use of the language beyond the classroom. One of our departmental research group meetings had to be, however, in Spanish. It was one of those interdisciplinary meetings with the education department in which there was no option but to talk in Spanish (I was told at the end of this meeting). The presenter discussed Ivanič's work. Since she knew I was familiar with it, she told me she might need my help. I was certainly happy, and willing, to join the discussion. The readings for discussion were sent in English. However, when her presentation started, Spanish was the language not only of the talk delivered but also the slides. The theory was translated into Spanish. I felt everything was misplaced. I felt misplaced—listening to a topic which I had appropriated in English, having discussed it with Roz herself, and now doing it in Spanish, and in Mexico. It was a very hard experience trying to assimilate first, the language (the choice of words to translate key concepts such as *self-hood*, *literary*, *community*, *stance*, among many others, into Spanish), and then, the actual meaning of the concepts (how these can be understood and the extent of them). I tried very hard for the first twenty minutes; I paid attention to every word and examples given, but I could not follow her. I certainly was not able to contribute anything to the discussion, and I left the room with a terrible headache which I could only get rid of with pain-killers. I do not feel happy about this. It is a feeling of frustration of not being able to talk in my own mother tongue about an academic topic with which I am deeply familiar.

As can be seen, my resistance to Spanish is not only in my writing, but also in my academic spoken language. At a conference last year, I met with a colleague from Spain. She attended my talk and approached me afterwards to engage in conversation. The conference used English as the lingua franca, and all presentations were in English. In one-on-one interaction, she immediately turned to Spanish; I persistently replied in English. I must confess I was terrified of speaking in Spanish. I did try to reply in Spanish, but I did not feel I was coming across clearly, and returned back to English. I suspect that I was performing literal translation of what I wanted to say in English, borrowing words and code-switching most of the time. I felt I must have sounded artificial. She noticed my insistence on continuing in English, and actually asked why. We did have a talk about

it. We agreed that having developed my degrees and learnt theory and concepts in English from early stages of my career had influenced my language choice and made it difficult for me to discuss my research in Spanish. Additionally, most of the literature in my field is written in English, so finding an equivalent or translating it into a different language might not transmit the intended message.

We became good friends, and on day two of the conference I became more comfortable with my switching—discussing everyday topics in Spanish, academic topics in English, and eventually, code-switching. I still gained the title “mi amiga la inglesa” though. I feel embarrassed about narrating this here now, but I guess it is part of the process. I also find it a good exercise to explain my research to people who speak no English at all; those have been challenging moments, but I feel my academic Spanish is improving. I was made aware of this when I gave my first academic talk in Spanish. I attended a conference in Mexico where the talks were in Spanish, so I had no other option. Presenting with a colleague gave me the courage to stand up in front of the audience, but deep inside my brain was in a constant battle for finding the words I was using. Luckily, she and I had the time to prepare things and talked about the key concepts (e.g., authorial identity, stance, engagement) and how to explain them conceptually and with examples.

I consider myself to have developed presentation skills after a few conferences I have attended (all in English); however, presenting in Mexico not only brought the challenge of speaking in Spanish, but also giving examples within the culture and in a way that related to the audience. After that talk, I must confess I have developed a bit more confidence to speak academically in Spanish. Yet, when it comes to writing, my Spanish needs more work. I am now careful with literal translation in simple expressions of an email, e.g. *Dear Jane*, should be *Estimada Jane*, and not *Querida Jane*. In more complex genres, my work is still in process, but I can narrate the specific moments when I have to face writing in Spanish.

Writing in Spanish: an unexpected encounter

I find writing in Spanish another abysmal struggle. As I work in the languages Faculty, I thought it was fine to communicate in English, so I replied in English to every email to students and my coordinators and even to the chair. No one has said anything to me, so I am still doing that in my department. However, when I submitted my application for funding for a research project, it was accepted, but on the condition that I translate the application into Spanish. I was informed that I had not received more funds because I wrote it in English. The process of writing those pages in Spanish was painful for me; I did not like the sound of it when I translated into Spanish. I translated it literally, and I hated it. “Spanish is more diplomatic,” a friend who proofread it told me, and my writing was too direct, with short sentences, and did not really flow within the Mexican context. Table 1 shows the two versions of the abstract, originally written in English and translated into

Spanish, to compare the writing. I have numbered the sentences in parentheses to refer to them more easily.

Table 1: Abstract in both languages.

English version	Spanish version
<p>(1) Thesis writing is an enterprise which integrates knowledge of different domains, i.e. the subject's content, rhetoric, academic discourse, the genre they are writing, and research skills (Bartholomae 1985; Read et al. 2001; Johns et al. 2006).</p>	<p>(1) La redacción de tesis es un proyecto que integra conocimiento y habilidades de diversos tipos, es decir, conocimiento del área en que se está haciendo la investigación, conocimiento de las normas de redacción académica y discurso académico, así como de la estructura de la tesis en particular, y habilidades para realizar investigación (Bartholomae 1985; Read et al. 2001; Johns et al. 2006).</p>
<p>(2) The integration of these elements makes thesis writing a challenging endeavour, especially when facing it for first time, as is the case for undergraduates.</p>	<p>(2) La integración de estos elementos hace de la tesis un reto, especialmente cuando se enfrenta por vez primera, tal como es el caso de estudiantes de licenciatura.</p>
<p>(3) Thesis writing at undergraduate level becomes more challenging when the writing is in a foreign language.</p>	<p>(3) Este proceso se vuelve aún más complejo cuando la redacción de la tesis en una lengua extranjera.</p>
<p>(4) In Mexico, undergraduate students are often required to write a thesis in English.</p>	<p>(4) En México, a menudo se requiere que los estudiantes escriban una tesis o composición en inglés.</p>
<p>(5) However, researching writing at undergraduate level has sometimes been undervalued as undergraduates are considered to lack an authorial voice (Helms-Park & Stapleton 2003; Stapleton 2002).</p>	<p>(5) Sin embargo, la investigación de la redacción a este nivel en ocasiones ha sido subestimada debido a que se considera que, a este nivel, los estudiantes carecen de <i>authorial voice</i> (Helms-Park & Stapleton 2003; Stapleton 2002).</p>
<p>(6) Based on the premise that every piece of writing contains voice (Ivanič 1998), an element of authorial identity, I focus my research on exploring authorial identity.</p>	<p>(6) Basados en la premisa, de que todo escrito contiene <i>voice</i> (Ivanič 1998), elemento de la identidad autoral, enfoco mi investigación en explorar la identidad autoral y analizo cómo los estudiantes de licenciatura, escritores novatos, expresan su identidad a lo largo de sus capítulos de tesis.</p>
<p>(7) I analyse how undergraduates, novice writers, express authorial identity across their dissertation chapters.</p>	

At first glance, it can be seen that I did a literal translation of the abstract. However, there is not much difference as the translation is transparent. The number of sentences was just one more in

English, where sentences contain one idea at a time. In sentence (6) in English it was better to keep it separate and use a period. In Spanish, the use of commas allows one sentence only. Something we can also observe is the use of the key concepts (e.g., authorial identity and voice, sentences 5 and 6), which were left in English in the Spanish version. Later, in the body of the paper, these concepts were explained (i.e., their definition was paraphrased and translated). This was my first text written in Spanish—though translated, as we can see.

I was certainly worried that my rhetoric might not be acceptable for that genre. I believe a research grant proposal should use more persuasive language and structure. I can recognise that this abstract is purely academic and not addressed to the institution, but to other academics, in both languages, English and Spanish. This is also evidence of the early career researcher not being familiar with the genre, and not being aware of the specific expectations for genre(s) in Spanish and in Mexico.

As for the body of the paper, I decided to start a new paper. It was a new proposal, same idea, same research questions, but a totally new paper, which gave the paper the readability for the Mexican audience. I used more complex sentences, and more paraphrasing of ideas. It took me over six months (thankfully there was no deadline for it) to return this paper. And I confess, I asked one of my best students to proofread it, just for the peculiar Spanish phrases I might have used. (Some people have told me I use English-influenced grammar constructions when I speak academically in Spanish.)

I have taken on other writing projects in Spanish ever since. It is getting better, I would say. The project that I presented in the conference in Spanish with a colleague was also written in Spanish, and it was certainly much better as we wrote it together. She is an experienced academic writer in Spanish. Thus, working in collaboration is helping me to improve my academic writing in my mother tongue. Another moment of successful academic Spanish was when one of my friends in Mexican academia replied to an email I wrote to her: “congratulations, you start sounding like a native Spanish speaker” (she said that in English); it was certainly a joke and I smiled, but deep inside that smile, I felt a bit of a tiny achievement of restoring myself back to academia in Spanish. I was recently invited to be a reviewer for a linguistics journal in Mexico; I felt good receiving the invitation, and I accepted. For a moment I forgot the context of what a journal implies in Mexico, so when I opened up the file, my surprise was to see the article in Spanish. This is a task I will face in the coming days; I have nothing to report about it yet except my feelings of excitement and unease at the same time. The writing of an academic article in Spanish is something I am just thinking of engaging with. I have received an invitation to do so. I am probably going to do it, but certainly not before writing one collaboratively with current colleagues. Luckily, it is still an option to present our articles in English or Spanish. I would engage with writing an academic article in Spanish as a personal challenge.

Bilingual early career researchers go through several processes of enculturation, when they move to the English-speaking country and adapt to the disciplinary writing practices of the L2 and then when they are back to their home country and learn their L1 practices (Casanave 1998; Shi 2003). Bilingual writers can develop different intellectual identities when successfully producing writing in both languages. This, of course, takes time and a process of re-adaptation to their L1 culture. I have been experiencing this process of readapting to my L1 culture.

Final Reflections

I decided to do an auto-ethnography based on the experience of doing a PhD in an English-speaking country and returning to my home country and writing in the L1. This approach to doing research has been new to me, and challenging in many aspects: as a person, as a bilingual and as a researcher. The process of inquiring into myself has been painful, as Ellis (2004) alerts might happen when doing an auto-ethnography. I was not expecting before to engage in ethnographic research and not even auto-ethnography, but that is a practice I was already doing (keeping my journals, taking photos of my own writing places, reflecting upon my practices), and I just needed to report it in a more formal way. As Papen (2008) says, we carry out auto-ethnography when we realise that a personal experience is linked to an object of study, and our research could open up to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. I believe the moving back and forth between languages is a common practice for bilingual academics, and certainly many of us face the similar struggles. I am certain that talking about these personal experiences and opening ourselves to understand others will lead us to explore certain aspects of multilingualism that we might otherwise minimise or not often think about.

I took on the bilingualism aspect of returning to write in my L1 as just a part of my auto-ethnography. Reflecting upon that has not only given me clarity on my own process, but also opened the view to explore new horizons in the broader field of the discipline and of the research approach. Having to move back to Mexico is giving me the opportunity to be bi-literate academically in both languages. I doubt I would have considered writing in Spanish if I were still living in an English-speaking country. I feel that the physical space—being involved in the culture, talking about my research to people who do not speak English, and listening to other academics speak about their research—are strengthening my academic Spanish, initially by giving me more confidence in my writing skills and now inducing me with opportunities to write an article in Spanish. Yet, this whole context makes me want to run away at times. Before writing this paper, I felt my writing production and my writing identity were practically static. Now, after the reflections done to write this paper, I can sense there is a growing evolution of myself as a writer. I feel I am evolving in my L2 writing, exploring a new genre, autoethnography, a genre which requires personal data, and reporting it all in an academic way. It has not been an easy task to share

my academic identities and the highs and lows I have gone through. But, the actual topic of the academic reflection made me assimilate the process I am going through and see how I am starting to develop my academic identity in my L1.

As for my geographical writing block, after a long search, it seems I finally found a place to write, a museum coffee shop in the ‘pueblo mágico’ of Cholula. It is not a crowded place, has some green areas, and with the bonus that as it is springtime, the one jacaranda tree in the green area is blossoming while witnessing my writing. It seems I found a place, at least for this paper. I feel I will soon need to be in search of a new place.

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