

WHERE IS ME?: AN EXPLORATION OF VOICE IN L2 WRITING AMONG THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of voice in second language (L2) writing is increasingly recognized as a key aspect of language proficiency, though it remains somewhat elusive and controversial. This study aimed to deepen the understanding of voice in L2 writing among 21 Thai university students. We analyzed their responses to questionnaires, including open-ended questions, using basic statistics and content analysis. The data collection took place in January, 2024. Our results revealed that a significant majority of students found writing in English challenging, and their L2 voice differed from their L1 voice. Additionally, their self-reports indicated distinctions between their written and spoken English. Students expressed a loss of confidence and a sense of disconnection from their true selves when tasked with writing in English. Our findings contribute to the literature on L2 voice in writing, confirming that L2 voice in writing is a multifaceted and contextualized construct. We provide practical recommendations for Thai teachers to assist students in developing their L2 voice. Finally, further research is needed to conceptualize Thai students' voice in English writing.

Keywords: L2 Voice, Thai university students, L2 writing challenges

INTRODUCTION

The notion of voice in L2 writing, especially in ESL/EFL context has been a much debated one. Some may argue that L2 voice in writing is not important in actual instruction among EFL/ESL learners - all they have to do is master the models. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to have your own voice, especially when you are not a native speaker of English. Some argue that voice is too high for non-native students to aim for. According to Tardy (2012), the concept of voice can be quite difficult to grasp. It is often the term that most writers are familiar with, possibly from their initial stages of writing, and many have intense reactions to it, be it positive or negative. In the Thai EFL context, the concept of voice has not been widely explored. This study aims to contribute new insights to the literature and scholarship on L2 writing.

The notion of voice refers to the unique style or perspective that a writer brings to their work. Prior (2001) has identified two main perspectives in the discussion about voice (1) an individual voice - the personal, unique style of the writer. It's the writer's individual perspective, experiences, and thoughts that make their writing unique and (2) a collective voice - the shared perspectives or experiences of a group.

It could be a cultural, social, or professional group. The collective voice represents shared beliefs, values, or experiences. In essence, Prior (2001) is acknowledging that when we talk about "voice" in writing, we can be referring to either an individual's unique style or the shared style of a group. Both perspectives are important in understanding the concept of voice in writing. In academic writing, voice exists.

Hyland (2002) contends that the concept of voice in academic writing is predominantly social rather than personal, implying that writers in academic settings tend to align themselves with specific groups instead of portraying themselves as individuals. Similarly, Leki (1997) argues that learners' L2 or English writings are culturally based; their L2 writing is interfered by their L1.

Our view is that voices and identities truly emerge when we move beyond the confines of grammar and vocabulary. While academic writing imposes certain constraints, a writer's unique signature can still be discerned. Beyond the rules and word lists, it is the content and the way we express it that sets each of us apart. We all possess a unique voice, a distinct tapestry woven from the threads of our

thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Making one's voice manifested in L1 is indeed a challenge. Hence, to develop one's voice in L2 is a real challenge, something that requires continuous training and education (Camps and Ivanic, 2001).

The journey of mastering a language is, fundamentally, a voyage of self-discovery and expression (Clark, 2018). This introduction sets sail into the profound importance of voices and identity in the context of language acquisition, where communication becomes a mirror reflecting the essence of one's soul.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to explore the multi-faceted and controversial concept of voice in L2 writing among Thai university students. The objectives of the research are as follows:

- To investigate the concept of voice in L2 writing perceived by Thai university students
- To identify the challenges and factors affecting students' confidence in English writing

By analyzing voluntary responses from 21 participants through questionnaires, using basic statistics and content analysis, we aimed to identify the challenges

students face when writing in English, as well as their levels of confidence and sense of self. Our findings, it is expected, would contribute to the conceptualization of L2 voice as a multifaceted and contextualized construct.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

This study on L2 voice in writing among Thai university students is expected to offer several significant benefits. By exploring how students perceive and experience writing in English compared to Thai, their native language, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges they face and the differences in their L1 and L2 voices. These findings can inform teaching practices, enabling educators and English language teachers to better support students in developing their English writing skills and their confidence. The practical recommendations derived from this research can be directly applied in classrooms, helping teachers to address the specific needs of Thai students. Additionally, this study contributes to the broader academic conversation on L2 voice, highlighting its complexity and contextual nature, and paving the way for further research in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Profound Significance of Voices

The notion of voice in writing itself is a complex one. It can be observed that the voice in writing often becomes an extension of one's self - one's identity (writing's identity). The act of expressing thoughts on paper can be a source of satisfaction. This is not merely an act of vocalization, but a recognition of the profound importance of voices (Clark, 2018). Writing encapsulates more than just words; it captures the essence of the individual. The expressions in writing are a reflection of a unique perspective, personality, and identity.

Voice in L2 Writing: A Useful Concept

Studies on cultures have illuminated how people think and feel through their writing and speaking. Edward T. Hall (1976) classified cultures into two groups: low and high context cultures. The Thai language is regarded as part of a high cultural group. This influences how Thai students write essays in English. This is later known as the L1 interference theory - their L1 interferes with their L2 expressions.

The concept of 'voice' in literature has been the subject of much debate. Elbow (2007), a prominent figure in the field, defines it as writing that authentically

captures the unique personality of the writer.

For him, great writing lets you hear the author's unique voice as if they're talking to you. Voice is a historical and cultural product. Bakhtin (1981) introduces the idea of "voice" as a social and historical concept. In simpler terms, he sees an author's language as a dialogue, where each expression is a mix of an individual's words (part of the conversation's central flow) and the broader influence of society and history, which adds multiple voices or perspectives (the diverse and separating forces in the conversation) (p. 272).

According to Hyland (2012), writers use stance and voice to show their understanding of the situation and the wider context. They use these to meet the expectations of their readers and present themselves in a way that will make their writing credible. Writing is always embedded in social practices and writers use these practices to shape their writing and themselves.

Recent research points to clashes between cultural values in L1-oriented composition pedagogy and the approaches of ESL students (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Examining voice, peer review, critical thinking, and textual ownership, the study identifies implicit incorporation of U.S.

individualistic ideology in these aspects, potentially at odds with ESL students' cultural preferences. The article emphasizes the necessity of understanding these cultural differences for effective cross-cultural writing research, echoing the insights provided by Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) in their exploration of individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers.

Inability to fully express one's wishes, feelings, and ideas can lead to anxiety and a loss of self-confidence. Tan Bee Tin, a prominent scholar in creative writing, captures these emotions in a poetic form titled *Loneliness of a Student Speaking English as His Second Language*.

Loneliness is:

when people don't understand you.

*when they constantly correct
your speech.*

*when people say "I beg your
pardon" to everything you say.*

*when they regard your silence as
a lack of desire to communicate,*

*despite your willingness to listen
with great intensity and force.*

*Loneliness is not being able to
speak your mind, your soul or your identity.*

(Tan Bee, 2004)

Considering the fundamental role of cultivating one's unique voice in English, it becomes apparent that writing style is akin to a fingerprint, distinguishing individuals and infusing a personal touch into communication. By nurturing and refining this voice, one not only enhances written expression but also establishes a more authentic connection with the audience. To better reflect identity in English writing, consider incorporating personal anecdotes, infusing cultural influences, and embracing individual quirks and expressions. Personal stories add authenticity and facilitate a deeper connection with readers. Introducing cultural nuances enriches one's voice, making the writing more distinctive, while embracing individual quirks contributes to the uniqueness and engagement of the content. In essence, the beauty of writing lies in its capacity to convey not only information but also the essence of the writer. By consciously cultivating and refining one's voice, effective communication becomes not just a skill but an art, leaving a lasting impression.

Research has shown that voice can help learners maintain control over the personal and cultural identity

they are projecting in their writing.) However, it is important to note that extended discussions about voice may be misleading teachers and students into believing that expressions of identity take precedence over ideas and argumentation (Camps & Ivanic, 2001). It is recommended that, therefore, research on L2 academic writing would be better directed towards argumentation skills and ideas than voice (Alharbi, 2020).

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Several limitations are inherent in this study. First, the relatively small sample size of 21 Thai university students may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. The study's focus on a specific cultural and linguistic context also limits its applicability to other settings, as the challenges and perceptions of L2 writing may vary across different regions and language backgrounds. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires introduces the possibility of response bias and social desirability effects, potentially influencing the accuracy of participants' reflections on their L2 writing experiences.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study centers on the exploration of L2 voice in writing among Thai university students, emphasizing the differences between their native language (L1) and second language (L2) voices. It integrates cultural and linguistic contexts, highlighting how these factors shape students' perceptions and challenges in expressing themselves authentically in English. The framework also considers the psychological impact of L2 writing, particularly how students' self-perceptions and confidence are affected by their ability to maintain a true voice in a foreign language. By using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to capture the multifaceted and contextual nature of L2 voice, while acknowledging the limitations related to sample size and potential response biases.

METHODOLOGY

In terms of research instruments, we relied on the online questionnaires of ten questions. The items in the questions were carefully chosen to address the issues related to the students' voice in L2 writing.

All the respondents were Thai nationals. All items in the questionnaire are all written in Thai.

There were 42 students taking a course on intermediate English reading and writing and 21 of them (50%) participated in the investigation. The students' responses were collected and content analysis was also performed. The data collection and the analysis of the collected data were done in January 2024.

FINDINGS

The data collected were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. The findings are the followings:

The table above presents the students' responses to the statement "I lack self-confidence when writing articles in English". It was found that the majority (52.4%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 28.6% were undecided.

It was also found that four respondents - a smaller percentage (19%) disagreed with the statement.

In response to the question - "I have a style of writing Thai that is different from writing in English.", it was found that the majority of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement (57.14%). Eight of them (38.1%) were undecided. Only one (4.8%) disagreed

Table 1 Confidence in writing in English

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
I lack self-confidence when writing articles in English.	1 (4.8%)	10 (47.6%)	6 (28.6)	4 (19)	0 (0)

Table 2 Styles of writing (Thai versus English)

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
I have a style of writing Thai that is different from writing in English.	2 (9.5%)	10 (47.6%)	8 (38.1)	1 (4.8%)	0 (0)

Table 3 Unique styles of writing in English

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
I have my own style of writing in English	0 (0%)	2 (9.5%)	14 (66.7%)	4 (19%)	1 (4.8%)

Table 3 illustrates responses to the statement “I have my own style of writing in English” from a group of students. The majority (66.7%) were undecided, while 19% disagreed with the statement. However, a smaller percentage (9.5%) agreed with the statement.

In response to the question “I write in English”, the majority of the students said they sometimes did it (66.7%).

Three (14.3%) often did it. Only two (9.5%) almost always did it. Two of them (9.5%) rarely did it.

Table 4 I write in English

Statement	AAW	OFT	SMT	OCC	RRT
I write in English.	2 (9.5%)	3 (14.3%)	14 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	2 (9.5%)

Table 5 I write in Thai

Statement	AAW	OFT	SMT	OCC	RRT
I write in Thai.	11 (52.4%)	7 (33.3%)	3 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 5 presents responses to the statement “I write in Thai”. The majority (52.4%) of the students stated they almost always wrote in Thai, while 33.3% mentioned they often did so. Only a small percentage (14.3%) indicated that they sometimes wrote in Thai.

In response to the question “I’m afraid of wrong grammar and using the wrong vocabulary when writing in English.”, the majority of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement (90.7%). Only two disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 6 Fears of Making Mistake

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
I'm afraid of using wrong grammar and vocabulary when writing in English.	13 (61.9%)	6 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.8%)	1 (4.8%)

Table 7 Clarity of Identities

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
My identity is unclear or missing when writing an essay in English.	4 (19%)	10 (47.6%)	3 (14.3%)	4 (19%)	0 (0%)

Table 7 illustrates responses to the statement “My identity is unclear or missing when writing an essay in English.” from a group of students. The majority (66.6%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 14.3% were undecided. A smaller percentage (19%) disagreed with the statement.

Table 8 presents responses to the statement “For me, expressing my opinions varies when writing in English compared to speaking in English.” from a group of students. The majority (66.6%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 28.6% were undecided. A small percentage (4.8%) strongly disagreed.

Table 8 Writing VS Speaking

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
For me, expressing my opinions varies when writing in English compared to speaking in English.	4 (19%)	10 (47.6%)	6 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.8%)

Table 9 Sense of Self

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Having to communicate in English makes me lose my sense of self.	1 (4.8%)	5 (23.8%)	9 (42.9%)	6 (28.6%)	0 (0%)

The table displays responses to the statement “Having to communicate in English makes me lose my sense of self” from a group of students. The majority (42.9%) were undecided, while 28.6% disagreed and another 28.6% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

The table presents responses to the statement “I feel uncomfortable communicating in English” from a group of students. The majority (57.1%) were undecided, while 33.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A smaller percentage (9.5%) agreed with the statement.

Table 10 Ease of Using English

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
I feel uncomfortable communicating in English	0 (0%)	4 (9.5%)	24 (57.19%)	14 (33.3%)	0 (0%)

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings regarding the confidence of the students in writing in English reveals the sentiments regarding the first statement “I lack self-confidence when writing articles in English” Despite being Business English majors, a substantial majority expressed agreement or strong agreement with this sentiment, indicating a prevalent lack of confidence among the respondents. In contrast, 28.6% remained undecided, suggesting a significant portion may harbor mixed feelings or uncertainty about their confidence in writing in English. A smaller proportion, 19%, disagreed with the statement, implying that a minority of students do not perceive a lack of self-confidence in their English writing abilities. The findings underscore the need for further exploration into the factors contributing to students’ confidence levels in English writing and potential interventions to enhance their self-assurance in this skill.

Table 2 looked into their perceptions regarding the existence of distinct writing styles in Thai compared to English. The majority of students, constituting 57.1%, agreed or strongly agreed that they possess a unique style of writing in Thai that differs from their writing in English. This acknowledgment suggests

an awareness among the respondents, potentially reflecting an understanding of the linguistic and cultural nuances inherent in these two languages. However, the sizable portion of undecided responses (38.1%) reveals a level of uncertainty among the participants, suggesting that some students may find it challenging to articulate or differentiate their writing styles across languages. Only a small fraction (4.8%) disagreed with the statement, indicating a minority who perceive less differentiation between their writing styles in Thai and English. These findings underscore the complex and nuanced nature of language and writing identity, pointing to the need for further exploration into the factors influencing these perceptions and potential pedagogical considerations in language education.

Table 3 sheds light on their perspectives regarding their individual writing styles in English. The predominant feature is the high percentage of undecided responses, reaching 66.7%, indicating that a significant majority of the participants expressed uncertainty or ambiguity about possessing a unique writing style in English. This may suggest that the students are either grappling with the concept of an individual writing style or are unsure about the distinctiveness

of their expression in the English language. The notable proportion (19%) who disagreed with the statement implies that a subset of the participants does not perceive themselves as having a distinct style in English, challenging the notion of individuality in their written expression. Conversely, a smaller percentage (9.5%) agreed with the statement, suggesting a minority who feel confident in asserting the presence of their own unique writing style in English. These results highlight the complex interplay of language identity and writing style perception among students, prompting further exploration into the factors influencing these attitudes and potential areas for pedagogical support in cultivating a sense of individuality in English writing (L2 voice in writing).

The patterns observed in Table 4, where a majority of Thai university students reported writing in English only sometimes, with a small percentage doing so almost always or often, align with common expectations in non-native English language learning contexts. This reflects the challenges often faced by students in regions where English is not the first language, where consistent engagement with the language may be hindered by various factors such as limited exposure, proficiency

levels, and opportunities for English language immersion. The prevalent “sometimes” responses could be influenced by curriculum demands, personal preferences, or a lack of pervasive English language environments. While these findings may not be surprising in the context of language learning difficulties, the variability in writing frequency highlights the importance of understanding individual practices and preferences within this group. This insight can inform tailored language education strategies aimed at improving English proficiency and writing skills among Thai university students.

Table 5 reveals their writing practices and their perceptions of having a unique writing style in English. A significant majority (52.4%) almost always write in Thai, emphasizing a prevalent preference for their native language. Another notable portion (33.3%) often engages in Thai writing, indicating a consistent language choice. However, the small percentage (14.3%) who sometimes write in Thai suggests a degree of variability in language practices within the group. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing language preferences among students, with potential implications

for language education strategies and cultural considerations in the academic context.

The data in Table 6 shows that the majority of the students (90.5%) were afraid of making mistakes in their English writing, such as using wrong grammar or vocabulary. This suggests that fear of making mistakes is a common concern among students who are learning English. This finding is consistent with a study by Phothongsunan (2016), reporting that the majority of the respondents identified grammar, research-related discussions, lack of technical vocabulary, sentence formation, and writing styles as the primary linguistic challenges for writing intellectually in English.

There are a few possible explanations for this. First, students may be concerned about how their writing will be perceived by others. They may worry that they will be judged as being incompetent or uneducated if they make mistakes. Second, students may be afraid of making mistakes because they believe that it will hinder their ability to learn and communicate effectively. They may worry that if they are not able to use correct grammar and vocabulary, they will not be able to understand what they are reading or writing, or that they will not be able

to express themselves clearly.

The data in Table 7 shows that a significant number of students (66.6%) feel that their identity is unclear or missing when writing an essay in English. This suggests that many students struggle to express their unique voice and perspective in their writing. There are a few possible explanations for this. First, students may be unsure of how to incorporate their own experiences and ideas into their essays. They may be afraid of making mistakes or being judged for their writing. Second, students may feel that they need to conform to a certain standard of English that is not representative of their own cultural or linguistic background. This can be particularly challenging for students who come from non-English speaking backgrounds. This finding is in line with a study conducted by Yang and Peng (2021) who found that when the students wrote in a second language (L2), and sometimes a third language (L3), they often viewed themselves in a less positive light. This is true regardless of their original language or how long they've been learning English. Many of these writers feel less human, less mature, or less intelligent when they write in a language other than their first. This shows how

writing in a second or third language can affect a person's self-perception.

Table 8 reveals some interesting insights into how Thai university students majoring in business English perceive expressing their opinions in writing and speaking English. It was found that 66.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their opinion expression varies across writing and speaking in English. This suggests a significant difference in their comfort and approach to voicing their views in these two modalities. 28.6% remained undecided, possibly indicating they haven't experienced a notable difference or are unsure about it. Only 4.8% strongly disagreed, implying a small group feels comfortable expressing opinions equally in both writing and speaking contexts.

Possible explanations include the nature of writing itself—writing provides more time to reflect, organize thoughts, and refine arguments, which can result in more nuanced and well-supported opinions. On the other hand, speaking requires real-time articulation, which can influence the spontaneity and directness of expressed opinions. Besides, written English often leans towards a more formal register, requiring adherence to grammar rules and stylistic conventions. This may

lead to students feeling constrained in expressing their opinions as freely as they would in spoken English, which tends to be more informal and conversational. Speaking involves immediate interaction with an audience, which can trigger anxiety or self-consciousness in some individuals, impacting their ability to confidently express their views. Writing, with its less immediate audience, might offer a safer space for some students to voice their opinions more freely.

Language proficiency: differences in vocabulary and fluency between written and spoken English could also play a role. Students might feel more comfortable expressing complex ideas in writing, where they have access to wider vocabulary and can carefully construct sentences. Spoken English, with its emphasis on immediacy and flow, might limit their ability to express these same ideas.

Students' sense of self when communicating in English paints a complex picture. Nearly half weren't sure if it affected them, suggesting nuanced shifts or lack of strong impact. Others felt a disconnect, losing touch with their native language and identity due to cultural connotations of English or limitations in expression. But some disagreed, confident in their English and viewing it

as a tool, not a threat to their core self. This diversity highlights the interplay of language, cultural identity, and individual adaptability in shaping how we navigate who we are in English communication.

The exploration of voice in L2 writing revealed that the concept is both contextualized and multifaceted. The students' responses significantly contributed to a clearer understanding of the concept.

While none reported overwhelming unease, English communication stirred mixed emotions among the students. In table 10, a surprising majority (57%) remained neutral, possibly indicating their somewhat discomfort or a lack of strong negative feelings. One-third, however, felt decidedly comfortable, suggesting confidence and ease in using English. The remaining 10% acknowledged discomfort, potentially due to anxieties about fluency, expression, or self-presentation. This spectrum of experiences underscores the personal nature of navigating communication in a second language.

The majority of students appear to grapple with the challenge of articulating themselves effectively in their second language (L2), English. Notably, they recognize

a discrepancy between their written expression in English and their spoken language voice. Identifying this divergence prompts the question of how to cultivate a sense of their L2 voice in written communication.

According to Matsuda (2001), L2 writing instruction should move away from assuming that voice is only possible in individualistic cultures. Instead, teachers should encourage students to develop their own voices, regardless of their cultural background. This can be done by helping students to identify and use language features that are specific to their own cultures. Additionally, modeling effective writing, enabling reflection, and allowing students autonomy in choosing topics contribute to a more genuine and resonant L2 voice in their written work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the following are our recommendations. Language educators should create an atmosphere that values authentic expressions, wherein students feel comfortable sharing their feelings and perspectives. This would involve employing teaching methods that resonate with personal experiences and encouraging peer collaboration. One way

to enhance their agencies is integrating technological tools and diverse mediums for expression can also enhance the development of individual voices. In the era of digital technology, the significance of voice has reached unprecedented levels (Clark, 2018).

Besides, recognizing and celebrating the unique qualities in each student's writing fosters a sense of identity and authenticity within the L2 writing process. The challenge lies not only in defining a student's L2 voice but in providing a supportive and inclusive environment that enables its emergence and growth.

AI-powered tools, when effectively harnessed, have the capacity to liberate students from the constraints of traditional discourse communities. By doing so, they encourage learners to explore

a broader spectrum of linguistic expressions, fostering a more diverse and enriched writing experience.

Further investigation should be conducted on the notion of voice in L2 writing in the Thai context. One area that could be done is the actual analysis of the students' written works. Another area lies in their voice in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Non-native English speakers, such as Thai, Vietnamese, and Chinese students, often encounter challenges expressing their thoughts and ideas in English due to grammatical limitations and lexical gaps. Generative AI would play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by offering real-time feedback, suggesting alternative word choices, and generating prompts that stimulate creative exploration.

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