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Article

Writer Identity in Transition: A Narrative Study of Pakistani MA TESOL Students' Academic Writing

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A B S T R A C T

Writing a thesis in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), particularly by non-native English authors, does not merely involve overcoming linguistic difficulties but also requires negotiating academic identity. Although much of the existing research on L2 thesis writing has emphasized lexis, grammar, and genre features, limited empirical attention has been given to how postgraduate students construct their autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves in multilingual, postcolonial contexts such as Pakistan. After conducting a qualitative narrative inquiry with fifteen MA TESOL graduates, drawing on semi-structured interviews, written narratives, observations, and thesis Introduction chapters, this study revealed how students' identity construction was shaped by both institutional expectations and personal agency. The results indicate that students frequently aligned with academic conventions to secure legitimacy, while at the same time attempting to assert individuality, often oscillating between cautious compliance and authorial presence. Moreover, supervisory practices and institutional gatekeeping were found to strongly influence the scope of identity options available to writers, limiting some while enabling others. Unlike prior studies that narrowly frame L2 writing as a linguistic challenge, this article combines narrative inquiry with rhetorical analysis of thesis texts in the Pakistani context. The study provides pedagogical implications for designing culturally responsive writing instruction and supervision practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing a thesis in English as a second language involves more than mastering grammar and vocabulary; it requires the development of an authoritative scholarly voice through which students present themselves as members of the academic community (Hyland, 2002; Belcher, 2013). In multilingual and postcolonial contexts such as Pakistan, this process is shaped not only by individual linguistic repertoires but also by institutional expectations, disciplinary conventions, and socio-cultural pressures that together influence how novice researchers negotiate credibility and voice (Ivanič, 1998; Canagarajah, 2004). Research on L2 thesis writing has frequently emphasised language-level difficulties like lexis, syntax, and genre features, yet scholarship that foregrounds identity formation and the subjective experience of becoming an academic writer remains comparatively limited (Sükan & Mohammadzadeh, 2022; Tardy, 2017). Where studies have considered identity, they show that writer identity is a multidimensional construct involving autobiographical history, discoursal practices, and authorial positioning, all of which interact with the possibilities institutions make available to writers (Ivanič, 1998; Li & Deng, 2019). Discussions on academic writer identity normally extend to academic voice, where students share their perceptions on who they are as scholars within the academic community as well as how this aspect would influence the way they present their arguments and negotiate authority.

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Empirical work on academic voice indicates how textual choices like self-mentions, stance markers, hedging, and citation practices, mediate the author's presence and authority in writing (Hyland, 2001; Kashiha, 2024, Kurniasih et al., 2020). For L2 writers, the demand to adopt disciplinary conventions can produce tensions between performing conformity and asserting originality: first-person pronouns and other markers of authorial presence may be strategically deployed or avoided as writers weigh credibility against institutional gatekeeping (Sun, Kuzborska, & Soden, 2022). The uneven provision of explicit academic writing instruction in many South Asian higher-education settings further complicates this negotiation; pedagogic traditions that prioritise rote learning and hierarchical teacher–student relationships often leave students with limited opportunities to experiment with authorial claims and rhetorical risk-taking (Anbreen, 2015; Mansoor, 2005). Studies from Pakistan and neighbouring contexts report that perceived language shortcomings and prescriptive assessment cultures contribute to self-doubt and constrained authorial agency among postgraduate writers (Sattar, 2017; Ahsan, 2023).

Although L2 writers often struggle with disciplinary expectations, research points to adaptive strategies that L2 writers use to manage these pressures. Strategic accommodation, modeling expert texts, staged lexical enhancement, and metacognitive self-editing, enables many writers to meet formal requirements while attempting to preserve some sense of voice (Hyland, 2004; Zhang & Wang, 2024; EL Hosayny et al., 2025). Intertextual learning and the purposeful use of citations can function as mechanisms for constructing authority, particularly when novice writers are guided to read and imitate disciplinary argumentation (Geng & Wharton, 2019; Sun et al., 2022). Yet such surface-level tactics do not automatically secure deeper rhetorical competence; without targeted pedagogical support, L2 writers may focus on correctness and referencing at the expense of argumentative depth and original contribution (Hyland, 2007; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Akki et al., 2023).

Despite these insights, there is a pressing gap in the literature on how writer identity formation unfolds specifically for MA TESOL students in Pakistan. Global studies of multilingual academic writing increasingly call for place-sensitive analyses that account for postcolonial legacies, local academic cultures, and unequal access to writing resources (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Canagarajah, 2022). Pakistani postgraduate writers inhabit an academic ecology shaped by historical language hierarchies and contemporary global standards. Historical language hierarchies in the Pakistani context is very much associated with colonial legacy which place English at the top of the hierarchy and the national language politics which promoted Urdu as the national language over other regional languages such as Pashto and Punjabi. Students therefore need to navigate between the country's language hierarchy and at the same time, conform to the demands of contemporary global standards. Pressures to conform to the international academic standard while negotiating the local linguistics ecology and socio-cultural dynamics to some extent, create struggles for the writers. Therefore, understanding how they negotiate autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves within this ecology will illuminate both personal strategies and systemic constraints (Khan, Majoka, & Fazal, 2016; Ramzan, Mushtaq, & Ashraf, 2023). Narrative inquiry approaches, which foreground lived experience and temporal development, are well placed to capture these dynamic processes and the emotional and cognitive labour involved in thesis writing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Matsuda, 2003).

Guided by this theoretical and empirical background, the present study asks: (1) How do MA TESOL students describe their identity negotiation strategies within institutional and linguistic constraints? and (2) How do their narratives reflect the challenges and accommodations involved in constructing autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves in academic writing? To address these questions, the study uses a narrative inquiry design with triangulated data sources of semi-structured interviews, written narratives, and rhetorical analysis of thesis Introduction chapters, situating findings within Ivanič's (1998) multidimensional model of writer identity. By combining textual analysis with participants' accounts, the research aims to show how strategic adaptation, supervision practices, and institutional gatekeeping jointly shape the trajectories by which Pakistani L2 writers attempt to claim scholarly membership while negotiating the limits placed on their authorial presence. The study therefore

contributes to scholarship on multilingual academic writing by providing an empirically grounded, context-sensitive account of writer identity formation among postgraduate L2 writers in the Global South.

II. METHODS

Research Design

The research uses a qualitative research design, with narrative inquiry used to study how Pakistan-based MA TESOL students build their writer identity using writing strategies. Narrative inquiry is especially appropriate in understanding lived experiences and facilitates in-depth knowledge of identity construction across time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In contrast to text-based analysis alone, narrative inquiry captures students' self-perceptions, decision-making processes, and contemplations regarding institutional constraints and thus is well suited to explore the complex dynamics of writer identity (Ivanič, 1998).

The emphasis on narratives allows the study to show how students read and make sense of their academic spaces, providing insights into the difficulties they encounter and the moves they make to establish their academic voice. By making the students' experience central, the study reveals not just their writing practices but also their negotiations of identity in the academic discourse community.

Participants

The study involved fifteen MA TESOL graduates from a university in Pakistan. Fifteen participants were deemed sufficient based on narrative inquiry principles, which prioritize depth over breadth (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The sample enabled rich, diverse accounts while ensuring manageable data for iterative, theme-based coding. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the recruitment of a diverse set of participants along the dimensions of language background, academic writing skills, and institutional support. The selection was guided by specific criteria: all participants had completed their MA TESOL theses in the previous academic year; they represented different levels of academic writing proficiency, as reflected in the supervisor feedback and final thesis grades; they came from multilingual backgrounds; and they had unequal access to academic writing resources, such as Coaching centres and mentoring services. MA TESOL postgraduates were chosen because they are engaged in the high-stakes task of thesis writing while still developing a scholarly voice. This stage makes them particularly informative for examining how writer identity takes shape during the writing process, rather than for assessing final proficiency. To further illustrate the composition of the participant group, particularly with respect to linguistic diversity—a factor closely tied to their identity negotiation—a graphical representation is presented in Figure 1.

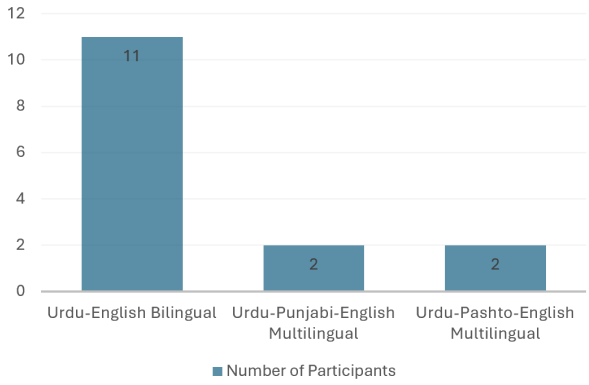

Figure 1. Linguistic Background of the Participants

Figure 1 is showing the linguistic background of the participants. The majority are Urdu-English bilinguals, followed by smaller groups of Punjabi-English, Pashto-English, and Sindhi-English bilinguals.

Data set and Instruments

The distinguishing feature of this methodological design lies in its triangulated approach across multiple data sources that are rarely combined in studies of writer identity. While previous research has often relied either on interviews or on textual analysis alone (e.g., Hyland, 2001; Ivanič & Camps, 2001), this study incorporates students' reflective interviews, their written narratives, and the rhetorical analysis of their Introduction chapters. Drawing on approaches similar to those used by Lillis (2001) and Street (2005), the interviews utilized a life history or writing history framework. The interviews were conducted primarily in English, as this was the medium of instruction of the MA TESOL program. However, participants were also allowed to shift to Urdu when they felt it enabled clearer or more authentic expression of their experiences. The interviews included prompts that encouraged participants to reflect on their significant writing

experiences, challenges, and the influences shaping their perceptions of themselves as writers. This approach provided a space for participants to articulate their past, present, and future orientations toward writing, offering valuable insights into how they constructed their identities within academic settings. The written narratives provided a platform for participants to communicate how they grappled with identity construction in academic contexts, offering a personal perspective on the external and internal factors influencing their writer identities. To observe the non-verbal cues including body language, tone, and expressions that might not be fully captured in the audio recordings and video recordings were taken during each interview. Focusing on the Introduction is particularly novel, as this section of the thesis is where students most strongly present their scholarly positioning, authority, and alignment with institutional expectations. In addition, the integration of observational insights regarding institutional resources and gatekeeping mechanisms broadens the scope beyond individual texts or voices, allowing the study to capture how writer identity emerges within a specific socio-institutional ecology. This methodological triangulation provides a more holistic account of identity construction than text-only or interview-only approaches, making it particularly innovative in the context of Pakistani L2 postgraduate writing.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analysed through a rigorous thematic analysis, drawing on Ivanič's (1998) framework of writer identity, including autobiographical self, discoursal self, and authorial self. Following Saldaña's (2009) dual-cycle coding methodology, the analysis began with open coding of interviews, thesis analysis, and written narratives. This initial phase identified recurrent elements related to personal history, writing strategies, and academic positioning. Codes were then organized into preliminary categories aligned with the research focus. The second coding cycle involved axial and pattern coding, refining categories and synthesizing them into cohesive themes. Both semantic and latent codes were used to capture surface-level meanings and deeper ideological constructs within participants' accounts.

Themes were systematically connected to Ivanič's identity dimensions to trace how participants negotiated their writer identities within institutional and socio-cultural constraints. Manual coding using color-coded tables enabled detailed engagement with the data. To ensure the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted. Member checking during interviews ensured that the interpretations remained faithful to participants' intended meanings, contributing to the validity and credibility of the findings.

III. RESULTS

How do MA TESOL students describe their identity negotiation strategies within institutional and linguistic constraints?

Claiming a space in the academic community: continuity, conflict, and contrasts

This section examines how Pakistani MA TESOL students construct their academic identities while attempting to claim legitimacy within the scholarly community. The narrative inquiry framework emphasizes continuity (past influencing present), interaction (individuals in social contexts), and situatedness (identity as contextually formed) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These lenses allow us to situate writer identity as not only shaped by textual practices but also deeply embedded in participants' evolving self-understandings.

Participant-1's reflections offered one clear trajectory of this struggle. Viewing academic writing as an aspirational practice, she stated:

> *"We are undeniably academic English writers… I might be at the periphery, still grappling with its vast expanse, but it's vital to embody the essence of the community you're part of."* (Participant-1, Written Narrative)

Participant-1's account also reflects limitations in the possibilities for selfhood she perceives. While she aspires to sound "academic," her emotional reaction to feedback and her struggle with voice suggest that she views authoritative academic identity as something distant or conditional. In contrast, Participant-2 perceived academic authorship as within reach, partly due to encouraging feedback during her undergraduate years, which broadened her imagined subject positions (Ivanič, 1998).

> *"I started seeing myself as a good writer when I got that amazing feedback in BS. It gave me the confidence that I have this caliber in me, and I can write something on my own."* (Participant-2, Written Narrative)

Participant-2's narrative reflects the continuity

element in narrative inquiry, her prior experiences of rote memorization in school created an initial detachment from academic writing, but supportive feedback at the BS level shifted her orientation. Unlike Participant-1, whose tone is cautious and aspirational, Participant-2 presents her academic identity as more grounded in affirmative experiences. This contrast illustrates that writer identity is not a linear progression; rather, it develops unevenly, shaped by educational feedback and prior histories.

Participant-3, however, revealed a form of strategic compliance with academic expectations, indicating discomfort with the perceived constraints:

> *"Sometimes I want to say something bold, but then I think, what if my supervisor doesn't like it? So, I rewrite it to sound more neutral."* (Participant-3, Written Narrative)

Participant-3's comment reflects Ivanič's (1998) concept of self-censorship within the discoursal self, where students moderate their voice to accommodate hierarchical authority. Unlike Participant-2, who viewed feedback as empowering, Participant-3 perceived institutional authority as limiting her authorial agency. Her narrative shows the interactional tension between self-expression and institutional regulation—key to narrative inquiry's attention to power-laden contexts. Participant-3's recurring self-censorship reflects a narrowed field of possibilities for selfhood—where boldness is internally restrained in anticipation of institutional disapproval. Her narrative shows how institutional feedback does not merely shape text, but reconfigures the imagined boundaries of what kind of writer one can be.

Meanwhile, Participant-4 offered a more emotionally blended account of her identity construction. She explained:

> *"When I write... from 50 to 80 percent totally comprises my thoughts and feelings. That is how I present myself."* (Participant-4, Written Narrative)

Her emphasis on affect and reflection suggests a stronger connection to the autobiographical self (Ivanič, 1998), wherein personal history, values, and emotions are not side effects but central to meaning-making. Yet, she too noted the institutional demand for impersonal tone:

> *"You can't totally depend on personal experiences; you have to keep in mind the norms and conventions as well."* (Participant-4, Written Narrative)

This dual positioning—of being both expressive and restrained—reflects what narrative inquiry terms as the tension between personal meaning and public form (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Taken together, these narratives construct a dialogic space where writer identity is neither fixed nor uniformly shaped by institutional norms. While Participant-1 and Participant-3 exhibit narratives of struggle, Participant-2 and Participant-4 highlight negotiation and partial resolution. These different perspectives point to the multidimensional nature of identity construction among Pakistani MA TESOL students. By reading these accounts narratively, one sees how identity is continuously constructed across time, shaped by educational experiences, institutional power, and personal convictions.

The student writer struggling with authority

This section explores how institutional authority, rote-based pedagogies, and limited academic writing training influence students' struggles to assert their authorial voice, drawing on Ivanič's (1998) concept of the *discoursal self*—how writers position themselves within academic discourse. Participant-5's reflections highlight the tension between institutional expectations and the pursuit of originality in academic writing. She expressed frustration over the rigid nature of academic tasks:

> *"Innovation means to increase the brand-new knowledge in human history. It is not that our coursework does not involve creative thinking, but it has no innovation... You are delivering it to others, contributing to the world... [The purpose of course essays] is reviewing."* (Participant-5, Interview)

Her comments reflect the rote-learning pedagogies prevalent in Pakistan's education system, where academic writing is often reduced to summarization and reproduction rather than knowledge creation (Anbreen, 2015). The *discoursal self* in Participant-5's writing appears constrained—she reproduces academic conventions but struggles to insert her own voice or critical perspective. Participant-5 also articulated her deference to authority, a reflection of socio-cultural hierarchies that position teachers as the ultimate knowledge holders. She remarked:

> *"... I am a student, so my teacher's writing must be better than mine... When I know he is a teacher, I would be influenced by his authority, thinking that he must write better than I do."* (Participant-5, Interview)

This deference limits students' agency, leading to a *compliant discoursal self* that focuses on replicating perceived academic standards rather than developing an independent authorial voice (Canagarajah, 2004). Such dynamics are exacerbated in EMI contexts, where linguistic insecurity further undermines students' confidence in asserting original ideas (Manan et al., 2016). A recurring theme in these narratives is the *performativity of citation practices*. Participant-5's frustration with referencing underscores how citation is viewed more as an academic ritual than a tool for argumentation:

> *"I found the citation style was quite annoying. When I started to get restless in the later stage of writing, I was even less in the mood to adjust. I probably would not have written the references if the teacher did not ask us to list them."* (Participant-5, Interview)

Here, citation becomes a *performative act*, disconnected from critical engagement with sources (Hyland, 2007). This reflects how academic writing conventions are perceived more as gatekeeping rituals than as tools for inquiry. Her disengagement suggests a discoursal self that complies with surface norms but lacks ownership over scholarly reasoning. Participant-6's narrative further highlights the systemic gaps in academic writing instruction:

> *"I think our teacher hopes that we write academically, but because I never had systematic academic writing training, my writing is not so professional or academic."* (Participant-6, Interview)

The lack of explicit instruction leaves students like Participant-6 to navigate academic writing through trial and error, often replicating surface features without understanding deeper rhetorical structures. This results in a fragile discoursal self, where students attempt to mimic academic writing without feeling a sense of ownership. Participant-3 also expressed her struggle with authority, particularly in balancing her ideas with the expectations of her supervisor:

> *"Sometimes I want to say something bold, but then I think, what if my supervisor doesn't like it? So, I rewrite it to sound more neutral. It feels like I'm censoring myself to fit in."* (Participant-3, Interview)

Participant-3's experience illustrates the *self-censorship* that many students adopt to conform to institutional expectations. This tension between self-expression and compliance results in a fragmented discoursal self, where students constantly negotiate between their voice and academic norms (Ivanič, 1998).

Negotiating the tension: Becoming an academic while remaining a student

Many MA TESOL students in Pakistan's academic system manage the difficult dual roles of students and up-and-coming scholars. It is especially difficult to strike a balance between following institutional norms and creating a unique authorial voice in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) settings. There are conflicts between claiming their scholarly identities and adhering to strict academic norms for students like Participant-7, Participant-3, Participant-4, Participant-8, and others. This section examines how these students construct their authorial selves while striking a balance between self-regulation, strategic adaptation, and external validation (Ivanič, 1998). Participant-7 explained her methodical approach to academic writing, which emphasizes clarity and grammatical accuracy. She frequently uses self-editing tools like Grammarly. She clarified:

> *"I will use 'Grammarly' to check and see if there are any grammatical mistakes. This is a necessary step. After that, I will also read through it and see if all the sentences are clear... Maybe sometimes I will find that I have repeatedly used some words... Then I will replace them with their synonyms while checking to increase the richness of vocabulary."* (Participant-7, Interview)

Participant-7's strategy reflects common *metacognitive regulation* practices among L2 writers (Sun et al., 2022). Her focus on clarity and lexical variety highlights how students self-regulate to align their writing with perceived academic standards. However, while these tools help refine surface features, they often do little to support the development of deeper rhetorical skills, leading to an overemphasis on correctness rather than critical engagement. Participant-3 similarly engaged in intertextual learning, analyzing expert academic texts to understand rhetorical structures and argumentation styles. She shared:

> *"I feel that their writings are different. To be specific, the argumentation is cunning, using proper examples, without any redundant words... If you read the sentences, you will find that there are not many clauses, and many words used are cunning."* (Participant-3, Interview)

Participant-3's observation reflects her focus on conciseness and rhetorical precision, echoing findings that L2 writers often model expert texts to refine their argumentative skills (Zhang & Wang, 2024). Her strategic adaptation shows an evolving

understanding of academic discourse conventions but also reveals the challenges of developing an authentic voice while mimicking expert styles. Participant-4 spoke about her struggle to incorporate field-specific terminology, which she saw as essential to establishing credibility in academic writing:

> *"I think the use of terminology is a symbol of standard and professional writing... I may not be able to find appropriate terminologies when I am drafting the essays, but I will add them after I finish the writing."* (Participant-4, Interview)

Participant-4's practice of *delayed lexical enhancement* mirrors common strategies among L2 writers who refine technical vocabulary in later stages of writing (Sun et al., 2022). This highlights how students prioritize content creation initially but later adjust their texts to meet disciplinary expectations, often perceiving the integration of terminology as a marker of academic legitimacy. Despite these efforts, institutional pressures heavily influenced students' writing decisions. Participant-8 emphasized how the need for external validation shaped her approach to academic work:

> *"First of all, it is a habit of an academic practitioner. I will add a reference list whenever I prepare for a presentation or a report, no matter whether it is required... This is because of my reverence and respect for knowledge. I want to make my writings more rigorous and express my gratitude to the authors providing insightful ideas... I have spent so much time looking for literature. Our teachers will give me more scores when they see my efforts."* (Participant-8, Written narrative)

Participant-8's focus on citation practices reflects how many L2 writers equate scholarly rigor with detailed referencing, often viewing citations as *performative acts* necessary for academic validation (Kashiha, 2024). This aligns with Ivanič's (1998) *authorial self*, where writers attempt to assert authority through adherence to formal conventions rather than through original argumentation. However, institutional constraints often limited students' ability to fully develop their arguments. Participant-2 expressed frustration with word limits and rigid structures that hindered her expression:

> *"Because of the word limit, we have deleted something in our draft... and these requirements have somewhat made us delete something in our writing. This deletion may not make the writing more concise, but it makes your argumentation feel like defective goods."* (Participant-2, Written narrative)

Participant-2's experience highlights the tension between *authorial autonomy* and institutional constraints, where students must balance creativity with rigid academic structures (Tardy, 2017). These constraints often lead to self-censorship, as students compromise the depth of their arguments to meet formal requirements. Participant-9 discussed the emotional toll of receiving critical feedback from her supervisor, which affected her confidence in asserting her ideas:

> *"I tried to make a strong claim in one section, but my supervisor marked it as 'too subjective'. It made me feel like I wasn't allowed to take risks in my writing. After that, I started playing it safe."* (Participant-9, Interview)

Participant-9's reflection illustrates how peer and supervisor feedback can lead to self-doubt and hinder the development of a confident authorial voice (Ivanič, 1998). The fear of negative evaluation often results in students choosing safer, more neutral arguments, reinforcing compliance over originality. Despite these challenges, students also found moments of empowerment. Participant-10 reflected on her gradual growth as an academic writer:

> *"At first, I was too focused on meeting all the rules, but over time, I started to see where I could insert my own ideas. It felt good when I realized I could still follow the structure but make it my own."* (Participant-10, Interview)

Participant-10's experience highlights the evolving nature of writer identity, where students gradually gain the confidence to balance academic conventions with personal voice. Her narrative reflects the delicate negotiation between adhering to institutional norms and developing authorial autonomy.

These tactics align with what Hyland (2004) terms "strategic accommodation"—a process where L2 writers conform to expected norms while attempting to preserve some sense of agency and individuality in academic voice.

How do their narratives reflect challenges in constructing autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves?

Agency vs. Compliance: Atrategic adaptation and passive conformity

The conflict between agency and compliance is among the most prominent themes in the data.

Students frequently fail to fully engage with the deeper rhetorical purposes of academic discourse as they alternate between actively modifying their writing to meet academic expectations and passively adhering to institutional norms. Participant-3's narrative illustrates this oscillation. During her interview, she described her strategic use of writing tools to meet academic standards:

> *"I use Grammarly to check my grammar and sentence structure. It helps me avoid silly mistakes. But sometimes, I feel like I'm just fixing surface errors, not improving the ideas."* (Participant-3, Interview)

Her assertion draws attention to a prevalent trend in which students use metacognitive techniques to improve the technical elements of their writing but find it difficult to interact critically with the subject matter. This trend is indicative of a larger problem in L2 academic writing, where strategic adaptation frequently prioritizes compliance at the surface level over deeper engagement (Sun et al., 2022). The Introduction chapters from several theses also reveal this duality. For example, in Nimra's thesis, the Introduction section followed a textbook structure, presenting background, research gaps, and objectives, but lacked a strong argumentative stance. Observation notes from a supervision session highlighted that her supervisor encouraged her to "follow the standard structure" without emphasizing the importance of argumentation. This guidance reinforced compliance over critical engagement, leading Nimra to conform rather than assert her voice. Similarly, Participant-2 reflected on her struggle to balance originality and compliance:

> *"I wanted to include more examples from my teaching experience, but I was told to focus on the literature review and keep it formal. It felt like my ideas didn't fit into the academic mold."* (Participant-2, Interview)

Participant-2's story demonstrates how students frequently repress their distinct viewpoints in order to conform to disciplinary norms, which results in a type of passive compliance that diminishes their agency. This is in line with Ivanič's (1998) idea of the discoursal self, which holds that authors may find it difficult to express themselves independently while positioning themselves within scholarly discourse.

Institutional gatekeeping: Power dynamics and academic access

The influence of institutional gatekeeping on students' writing habits is another recurrent theme. Academic structures frequently perpetuate power dynamics that restrict students' authorial agency through strict assessment standards, supervisor expectations, and linguistic hierarchies. Participant-9 recounted a disheartening interaction with her supervisor:

> *"I submitted my draft, and my supervisor said it was too informal. I thought I was making a strong argument, but apparently, I wasn't 'academic' enough. It made me question whether I understood academic writing at all."* (Participant-9, Interview)

This exchange demonstrates how supervisors frequently act as gatekeepers, imposing particular discourse norms that marginalize alternative styles or rhetorical devices with cultural influences (Shamim, 2008). Additionally, observation notes from a thesis workshop showed that form—grammar, structure, and citation style—was the main focus of feedback rather than the quality of the argument or the content. This focus on outward appearances restricts students' capacity to participate critically in scholarly discourse and maintains hierarchical power dynamics (Manan et al., 2016).

Participant-11's thesis Introduction chapter reflected this influence. While her research focused on gender identity in English textbooks, her writing lacked a critical stance, instead summarizing existing literature without engaging deeply with her findings. In her interview, she admitted:

> *"I was worried about being too critical. I thought it might not be accepted, so I stuck to summarizing the sources."* (Participant-11, Interview)

This example shows how academic writing becomes safer and less critical as a result of institutional gatekeeping that deters students from taking intellectual risks. In L2 contexts, where students from non-dominant linguistic and cultural backgrounds are frequently marginalized, it also reflects larger concerns about academic gatekeeping (Canagarajah, 2004).

Cultural identity and academic discourse: negotiating multilingualism and voice

The way in which students negotiated their cultural identities while participating in scholarly discourse emerged as a major theme. Many participants talked about the conflicts they face between embracing their cultural heritage and following academic standards that are primarily Western-centric.

Participant-8 considered how difficult it was to include her cultural viewpoint in her thesis on gender roles in English language instruction:

> *"I wanted to include examples from local classrooms, but I was told to focus on international studies to make my thesis more credible. It felt like my own experiences weren't valuable enough."* (Participant-8, Interview)

This statement highlights how institutional expectations often privilege Western academic norms, leading students to suppress culturally rooted insights. Observation notes from a peer review session revealed similar concerns, with several students expressing reluctance to use local examples for fear they wouldn't be seen as "academic."

Conversely, Participant-4 successfully integrated her cultural identity into her thesis, though not without challenges. Her study on socio-cultural factors in English learning included narratives from local students, which she framed within existing academic discourse. She explained:

> *"I wanted to show how cultural background affects learning, so I included personal stories from my students. It was tricky to make it 'academic,' but I think it added depth."* (Participant-4, Interview)

Participant-4's approach demonstrates the possibility of integrating cultural identity into academic discourse through strategic framing. Her success reflects Ivanič's (1998) concept of the autobiographical self, where personal experiences and cultural backgrounds shape writer identity.

Emotional and psychological negotiations: confidence, marginalization, and empowerment

Other important themes that surfaced were the psychological and emotional components of academic writing. In negotiating institutional expectations, students often reported experiencing feelings of self-doubt, marginalization, and, on occasion, empowerment. Participant-7 described how she battled feelings of inadequacy:

> *"Every time I submitted a draft, I felt nervous. I kept wondering if I was good enough. When I got my thesis approved, I was relieved, but it didn't feel like my work—it felt like something I made to pass."* (Participant-7, Interview)

Her story illustrates the emotional toll that L2 academic writing requires, as linguistic and cultural barriers frequently cause students to internalize feelings of inadequacy (Hyland, 2015). The pressure to meet academic standards adds to this emotional toll, causing a gap between students' academic writing and their personal voices. However, as she grew more assured of her academic skills, Participant-10 talked about moments of empowerment:

> *"In the beginning, I was scared to make strong claims. But as I got more feedback and revised my work, I started feeling more confident. By the end, I felt like I had something important to say."* (Participant-10, Interview)

Participant-10's story demonstrates how students can develop and become more empowered during the academic writing process, especially when they receive helpful criticism that promotes critical thinking. Similar trends were found in observation notes from thesis defense sessions: students who got encouraging supervision were more comfortable defending their work, whereas those who got critical or contemptuous feedback frequently seemed unsure and hesitant.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Pakistani MA TESOL students construct their writer identities through a complex negotiation of agency and compliance. Participants relied on metacognitive strategies, citation practices, and intertextual modelling to align with institutional expectations, yet often self-censored when confronted with supervisory authority. This reflects Ivanič's (1998) model, where autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves are continuously reshaped by institutional constraints. The emphasis on surface correctness and cautious stance-taking mirrors Hyland's (2001, 2002, 2007) observations on metadiscourse and genre pedagogy, while the strategic use of citations as a proxy for authorial presence resonates with Sun, Kuzborska, and Soden's (2022) longitudinal study of L2 postgraduate writers.

The strong influence of supervisors and institutional norms in shaping authorial choices aligns with earlier analyses of gatekeeping in multilingual academic contexts (Canagarajah, 2004; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Participants' accounts of self-censorship and deference to supervisory feedback replicate patterns where feedback prioritises form and compliance over argumentation, narrowing the available forms of authorial agency (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). These findings reinforce critiques that academic supervision in South Asian higher education often

functions as a regulatory mechanism, shaping what counts as legitimate writing and discouraging risk-taking.

The study also highlights how citation practices become performative acts rather than tools for constructing argumentation. Participants frequently equated academic credibility with extensive reference lists, reflecting concerns raised by Hyland (2007) and Geng and Wharton (2019) that novice writers often imitate surface features of disciplinary writing without fully engaging with sources. While citations provided symbolic legitimacy, they were seldom mobilised to build epistemic authority. This pattern aligns with Sun, Kuzborska, and Soden's (2022) observation that L2 writers must be explicitly guided to use citations dialogically to claim a voice within disciplinary conversations. Without such guidance, students risk producing formally correct but rhetorically weak texts.

Another central issue concerns the tension between local cultural knowledge and global academic norms. Students' reluctance to include locally grounded examples, despite their relevance, illustrates how postcolonial hierarchies continue to privilege Western academic models (Canagarajah, 2022; Khan, Majoka, & Fazal, 2016). While some participants found ways to frame personal or cultural narratives within accepted academic discourse, many others suppressed such contributions for fear they would be judged as insufficiently academic. These findings highlight the symbolic power of international standards in shaping what counts as knowledge, often marginalising voices rooted in local ecologies.

The emotional dimension of identity negotiation further complicates these dynamics. Students frequently reported feelings of self-doubt, marginalisation, and hesitancy in asserting their ideas, particularly when feedback framed their writing as "too informal" or "too subjective." Such responses echo Hyland's (2015) account of how academic publishing and supervision can reproduce exclusionary norms, leaving writers uncertain about their legitimacy. At the same time, some participants described gradual empowerment through iterative feedback and revision, reflecting Pajares' (2003) argument that self-efficacy in writing is built through sustained practice and validation. This suggests that institutional practices that emphasise supportive, dialogic supervision and scaffolded genre pedagogy could enable writers to balance conformity with the development of an authentic scholarly voice (Tardy, 2017).

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Pakistani MA TESOL students negotiate their writer identities during thesis writing, focusing on the strategies they adopt and the challenges they encounter. The findings show that students used metacognitive regulation, intertextual modelling, and delayed lexical enhancement to align with institutional expectations, while also searching for opportunities to assert individuality. Yet these strategies often functioned as strategic accommodation, reflecting the constraints imposed by supervisory authority and institutional gatekeeping. Narratives revealed the fragile nature of the discoursal self, where students oscillated between personal expression and self-censorship, shaped by linguistic insecurity and hierarchical relationships.

Beyond documenting these struggles, the study contributes to scholarship on multilingual academic writing by situating identity construction within Pakistan's postcolonial higher education context. It demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry in capturing the temporal, emotional, and contextual dimensions of thesis writing, offering insights that text-based analyses alone cannot provide. By showing how individual trajectories intersect with broader institutional pressures, the research highlights the need for supervisory practices and pedagogical approaches that move beyond surface-level compliance, enabling L2 writers to cultivate confident and authoritative scholarly voices.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: UM.TNC2/UMREC_1064. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Ambreen Siddique drafted the manuscript. **Siti Zaidah Binti Zainuddin** and **Cheong Huey Fen** reviewed and revised the manuscript for intellectual content and clarity.

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DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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