Meaningful Literacy and Agentive Writer Identity[1]

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Abstract

Studies on learner identity and studies on meaningful literacy seem to have gone on parallel tracks with little intersection between the two, leading to a lack of understanding regarding the impact of meaningful literacy on learners' identities, particularly as writers in a foreign language environment. In this context, this article reports on a study in which the teacher examines how meaningful literacy in the form of life writing shapes his English as a foreign language (EFL) writers' identity. The study used students' writing samples and written reflections as the primary data and through the lens of a poststructuralist theory of learner and writer identity. The author found that extensive investment in life writing in a supportive social milieu, including both story writing outside class and free writing in class enabled EFL learners to achieve agentive writer identities, i.e., forming a new habit of writing, gaining confidence as a writer, and taking life writing as a craft. This positively and actively invested relationship with writing in a foreign language suggests that life writing should be made an option in English literacy education to promote L2 writers' identity development.

Resumen

Los estudios sobre la identidad del alumno y los estudios sobre la alfabetización significativa parecen haber seguido caminos paralelos con poca intersección entre los dos, lo que lleva a una falta de comprensión sobre el impacto de la alfabetización significativa en las identidades de los alumnos, particularmente como escritores en un entorno de lengua extranjera. En este contexto, este artículo informa sobre un estudio en el que el profesor examina cómo la alfabetización significativa en la forma de escritura cotidiana da forma a la identidad de sus escritores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Utilizando las muestras de escritura de los estudiantes y las reflexiones escritas como datos primarios y a través de la lente de una teoría postestructuralista de la identidad del alumno y el escritor, el autor encontró que invertir esfuerzo en la escritura de la vida en un entorno social de apoyo, incluyendo tanto la escritura de historias fuera de clase como la escritura libre en clase permitió a los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera alcanzar una identidad de escritor agentivo; es decir, formar un nuevo hábito de escritura, ganar confianza como escritor y entender la escritura como un arte. Esta relación de inversión positiva y activa con la escritura en un idioma extranjero sugiere que la escritura de la vida debería ser una opción en la educación en alfabetización en inglés para promover el desarrollo de la identidad de los escritores L2.

Introduction

English writing is a major area of struggle for many EFL learners, who are constrained by factors such as large class size and lack of trained writing teachers (Leki, 2001). Studies in EFL contexts like Thailand (c.f., Thongchalerm, & Jarunthawatchai, 2020), Indonesia (Toba et al., 2019) and China (Cheng, 1994; Wang, 2005; You, 2004; Zhang et al., 1995) have all identified writing as a particularly thorny area of learning and teaching. EFL learners often struggle not only in language use at lexical and discoursal levels, but also in content generation.

To solve these problems, various pedagogical interventions have been proposed. In China, for instance, some instructors began to adopt a process approach (Li, 2000) to facilitate students' learning of vocabulary and grammar rules or a genre approach (Gao, 2002; Qi, 2011; Yang, 2016) to familiarize students with a wide range of genre features. A length approach (Wang, 2005) and a *xu* or continuation approach (Wang, 2012, 2014) were also theorized and promoted in the past two decades. While the length approach encourages EFL students to write as long as possible, hence the *length*, the *xu* approach focuses on designing story-completion tasks to lift students' linguistic performance while allowing some creativity in content. These approaches adopted in China share a similar premise; that is, EFL writing is mainly treated as a process of imitating more competent others' ways of writing in English. In doing so, EFL writing is frequently taken as an instrument to learn the English language, leaving the writer, the writer's background, and evolving subjectivity largely unconsidered. Influenced by this kind of mindset, it is not uncommon for Chinese EFL writing teachers to encourage their students to memorize sample essays as the main writing strategy.

In contrast to a heavy emphasis on linguistic performance, students' challenge in content generation is often neglected. Previous studies, at least those in China, rarely discuss how teachers can facilitate their students in generating rich content or creating new meanings while teaching them to write in English. This

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neglect can be consequential. In a recent study, a great number of secondary school students in rural China were reported to still fail their high school entrance English composition exams despite frequent practice on similar topics. Many of the students did not write anything at all; others copied reading materials from the test papers as their own writing (Yang et al., 2019). Studies like this suggest that a narrow focus on language learning may do disservice to EFL learners' growth as writers. Besides the *how* to write, the *what* to write should also be given due attention.

As presented above, to help EFL learners focus not only on *how* but *what* to write holds important pedagogical value. This perspective is currently discussed in the context of L2 creative writing in terms of "meaningful literacy" (Iida, 2016; Kim, 2018). Meaningful literacy is an orientation using expressive genres such as poetry and autobiographical writing to position learners "at the center of language learning and recognize the symbolic transformations in relation to self and world that learning a language entails" (Hanauer, 2012, p. 108). However, these studies tend to focus on analyzing textual features of students' works, particularly poetry, instead of content development. Also, the effects of meaningful literacy are rarely linked to scrutinized views of writer identity. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to describe specific ways meaningful literacy is used for content development in an EFL writing class and its impact on the learners' writing processes and sense of self as writers.

Theoretical Framework

Meaningful Literacy

Meaningful literacy is a wave of scholarship in applied linguistics that attempts to foreground learners' humanity in language teaching and learning. In his introduction to a special issue *L2 Writing and Personal History: Meaningful Literacy in the Language Classroom*, Hanauer (2013) traces this movement to the turn of the 21st century. At that time, scholars like himself began to recognize "a need for individual consciousness, contextualized and historicized, whether teacher or student, to be re-emphasized and situated at the center of applied linguistics" (p. 3). As such, he suggests that meaningful literacy attempt to involve the whole person or the "living, thinking, experiencing and feeling person" (p. 106), instead of just the "cognitive person" (p. 105). He further defines meaningful literacy as literacy education that integrates learners' life histories, their growing capacity to make meanings, and their evolving understanding of the self, both as mediated by language learning (p. 108).

In his earlier exploration of meaningful literacy, Hanauer (2010, 2012) experimented with second language poetry. He argues, drawing on his extensive experience of teaching poetry writing to ESL students in the United States and an analysis of their poetry collection, that poetry writing is not only feasible, but also beneficial in developing students' ownership of the English language (Hanauer, 2013). The use of poetry writing with proficient multilingual professionals was also found to facilitate their understandings and expressions of what they experienced both in their home and host countries (Kim & Park, 2019). Interweaving the use of basic vocabulary, rich imagery, and high emotive contents, second language poetry writing proves an effective genre to engage learners in artistic expressions of their unique life experiences and perspectives (Hanauer, 2013). In an earlier article, Hanauer (2003) argues that poetry writing provides second language writers with a textual space for "the unique construction of a personally meaningful cognition of an artistic experience, thought, or feeling" (Hanauer, 2003, p. 77).

Also using personal experiences as the pedagogical point of entry, autobiographies, and autoethnographies can be considered to be another two major forms of meaningful literacy. Their use with multilingual writers proves effective in revealing the writers' multiple identities and dynamic identity work, including their evolving sense of self as competent writers (Cummins, et al., 2015; Edelsky, 1993; Kim & Saenkhum, 2019; Yang, 2013, 2018). Furthermore, in their autoethnographical analysis, multilingual writers may discover a sense of self, not just defined by one language or one culture, but as a "hyphenated" mixture of both (Park, 2013) or as a multilingual subject (Kramsch, 2006) or translingual subject, achieving a state of cultural integration (Canagarajah, 2015, 2020).

Despite their difference in forms, the studies above all share a critical trait of meaningful literacy: they all seek to humanize the learners by linking literacy learning with the learners' backgrounds, emotions, and ongoing self-explorations. As Hanauer (2012) states, when providing meaningful literacy through poetry writing in his own class, he assumes: 1) learners are social and cultural beings; 2) language learning mediates learners' expanding visions of themselves and capacity to communicate such visions to others; and 3) language learning contributes to learners' identity work. He then outlines four principles to guide

his pedagogical process. These are: using autobiographical writing tasks, encouraging expressions of personal feelings, facilitating learners' reflections, and making writing a social experience. These premises and principles are useful guidelines for EFL writing teachers who are interested in adopting meaningful literacy in their own contexts as well.

<u>*Writer Identity*</u>

However, in current studies of meaningful literacy, writer identity is often only hinted at. But in my view, writer identity should be brought to the fore in further explorations of meaningful literacy. My reasons are threefold. First, while meaningful literacy is concerned with pedagogical design in a micro-classroom context, by considering issues with writer identity, writing teachers may begin to address larger issues of power and ideology surrounding literacy education at a societal level. Consider multilingual and/or multi-modal identity texts that promote a positive self-image and literacy engagement among underachieving students (Cummins et al., 2011; Cummins et al., 2015). Although these studies are not described as meaningful literacy by the researchers themselves per se, just like meaningful literacy, they centralize humans as dialogical beings (Bakhtin, 1981), who are constantly making meanings within relations of self and others. As Cummins et al. (2015) comment on the significance of creating identity texts in literacy education:

> *The creation of multimodal identity texts is obviously a cognitive and linguistic process but it is also a sociological process that potentially enables students and their teachers to challenge coercive relations of power that devalue student identities; the identity text acts as a vehicle whereby students can repudiate negative stereotypes and simultaneously construct identities of competence that fuel academic engagement.* (p. 559)

All too often, language learners are viewed from a deficit mindset, which may be internalized by the learners themselves from their earlier educational experiences. Learners' identity texts thus may contribute new knowledge of self and a counter-view within and beyond a particular instructional space that helps learners to relate to literacy education and themselves in more positive ways (Cummins et al., 2011).

Second, writer identity, as theorized from a poststructuralist perspective, may provide a productive lens to understand the mechanism behind meaningful literacy. A poststructuralist view of learner identity as multiple, amongst other things (Block, 2007; De Costa, 2016; Norton, 2000; Ricento, 2005), is implied in Hanauer's (2012) comments on his ESL students engaging in poetry writing. Using terms like "student poets" to describe his students (p. 112), Hanauer assumes that they do not just carry a fixed identity as ESL learners (which implies a lack in language proficiency), but also a potential for them to be poets in a second language, albeit through the teachers' support. As found in numerous studies of multilingual writers (Lam, 2000; Yang, 2013; You, 2011), this process of recognizing and embracing learners' multiple identities is critical in motivating learners to deeply engage in literacy activities from powerful, rather than marginalized, positions. In Norton's (2000) case study of immigrant women in Canada, one "brave mother" spoke despite her faulty English, both over the phone and, by extension, through her diary, because her standing as a mother empowered her to speak on behalf of her family's interest. Likewise, multilingual writers can also begin to claim their right for speech or writing voice, as afforded by their more desirable social identities. Learners' multiple identities, including the imagined identities they wish to obtain through their *investment* in language and literacy activities (Norton, 2000, 2013), thus function as an invaluable resource for them to create preferred meanings for themselves.

Further, a dialogical and narrative perspective on identity (Bakhtin,1981; Bruner, 1984; Menard-Warwick, 2005; Yang, 2013), which considers identity as both changing and having the possibilities for continuation, helps explicate the long-term effects of meaningful literacy on learners. While accepting that writer identity is but one of the many identities a learner embodies and that there can be other identity options, a dialogical perspective also recognizes the possibility for learners to fashion their sense of self in line with their personal desires (Bruner, 1984; White, 2007). Such a view acknowledges the intricate connections between writing and writer identity, especially the *autobiographical self*. According to Ivanic (1998), who proposed a three-faceted framework of writer identity, autobiographical self refers to both the writer, or the writing subject, and the writer's multidimensional background and multifaceted sense of origin. It functions like *habitus* in a Bourdieu (2004) sense, with a relatively stable orientation. This view of writing, with the writer deeply involved, rather than a view of writing as a mechanic process, is not unlike humanizing literacy education through meaningful literacy. Therefore, by linking writer identity and

meaningful literacy together, we can begin to explore more closely how meaningful literacy education may add to or alter a disposition that a learner has already developed.

Research Questions

The earlier research on EFL writing and meaningful literacy provides important insight on content generation as one major challenge faced by language learners while meaningful literacy seems to allow learners to step into alternate identities like "student poets." However, what remained to be understood are specific ways meaningful literacy is provided in EFL contexts and its impact on EFL learners' writer identity. Thus, in this paper, two research questions guided this descriptive study of the use of meaningful literacy in a particular EFL writing course and its impact on the learners' writer identity:

1) What form of meaningful literacy was adopted in my creative writing course in China?

2) What changes occurred to EFL learners' writer identity following a meaningful-literacy oriented writing course?

This study employed a descriptive method, which used the researcher's own classroom as the main research site. According to Nassaji (2015), a descriptive study focuses on describing a phenomenon and its features within a natural setting, addressing mainly questions of *what*, instead of *why* and *how*. He further points out that such research is suited for exploring complex topics such as teaching and learning in a second language.

Context

The study took place in a culturally and linguistically diverse university in southwest China. The classroom was well-lit and equipped with a computer and a projector classroom placed in the front. The seats were arranged in rows.

Meaningful literacy was adopted in an English Composition 1 course, a course all English-major students were required to take in their first semester of the second year. The objectives of the course were to develop students' abilities to write narratives in English, both fluently, vividly and grammatically, with grammar focusing on the proper use of past tense verbs, personal pronouns, and sentence-forming conventions. Students were also to learn paragraph development skills. Students' participation in writing was inevitably influenced by the compulsory nature of the course and the ways in which they were encouraged to write regularly. As I wrote in my syllabus (originally in Chinese), grades were given on the basis of students':

Weekly writing: 30%

Attendance, participation, and in-class free writing: 10%

Recommending good essays to class: 10%

Timed writing: twice, 20%

Student writers' conference: twice, 20%

Course reflection: 10%

Clearly, more weight was given to the students' weekly writing, which accounted for 30% of the total scores, whereas timed writing, focusing on students' accuracy and mastery of writing conventions, only accounted for 20% of the total. For the weekly writing, the students produced one sample each week, each sample of at least 500 words, for 15 weeks, although a shorter piece did not incur loss of grades. The priority was not given to writing for accuracy or length, but rather forming a habit of writing. Further, students were encouraged to engage in writing as a social practice, both through recommending good essays (10%) and attending student writers' conferences (20%), at which they had a chance to read their best writing to their classmates.

Participants

The students, 116 in total, had all been learning English for at least six years before studying English as their major in 2011. The students had class with me in four different groups. Each class had about 30 students and met with me once a week for 80 minutes, with a five-minute break in between.

Feedback

I gave selective feedback to my students' after-class writing samples only occasionally both because it was found to be more effective (Lee, 2013) and because without any teaching assistants, selective feedback was simply more manageable. To help my students master English writing conventions, I

involved them in short language-focused pair discussions to revise sentences and paragraphs that I had chosen from their own writing, without revealing students' names. I also gave my written feedback using English, focusing on content development and mainly in a Chinese online *pigaiwang* environment (http://pigai.org). *Pigaiwang* launched its free automatic feedback service in 2011 and is ideal in identifying mechanic issues like spelling, run-on sentences, and capitalization. The platform still provides limited functions for free.

Data Collection

I collected the following types of data: Course syllabus of Composition 1 (identified as S), lesson plans (identified below as 1L, 2L, etc.), PowerPoint slides in class (identified below as 1P, 2P, etc.), students' weekly writing samples outside class (identified below as 1W, 2W, etc.), students' first free writing samples (1F), and 103 reflective writing samples at the end of the semester (coded as R). Students' free writing samples, done on paper, were collected from the first writing class. The weekly writing samples were electronically submitted on *pigaiwang*, with each student's writing time-stamped and organized in an individual file (see Appendix 1 for a list of writing tasks and the titles or themes of one student's writing). The reflection task, originally in Chinese, asked each student to first make a collection of the best sentences from their writing samples during the whole semester, provide a title, and then use one or two paragraphs to describe how his or her writing has changed. Each reflection would be awarded 10 points regardless of the content (see Appendix 2 for the original prompt in Chinese and my translation into English). This arrangement to a degree encouraged the students to not simply say what I wanted to hear, but what was true to their experience as they reviewed their own writing samples. Students all gave written consent at the end of the semester for their data to be analyzed for research purposes.

Data Analysis

I mainly analyzed the course syllabus, students' free writing samples, and weekly writing tasks to answer the first question, i.e., What form of meaningful literacy was adopted in my creative writing course in China? To find out the impact of meaningful literacy on EFL learners' writer identity and writing practice, I mainly analyzed students' reflections on how their writing has changed through the following procedures. First, I examined the learners' self-perceived changes as emergent from their written reflections. While my interpretation was informed by the poststructuralist theory introduced earlier, my analysis was largely an open-coding (Khandakar, n.a.) process of identifying "I statements" and "We- You- statements" together with linguistic cues for comparison such as "more," "less," and "no longer."

The "I-statement" analysis was first developed by Gee (1999) to identify how speakers discursively change in relation to their deeds, thoughts, and emotions (cf., Zhao, 2015). Zhao (2015) also proposed the analysis of "We- you- statements" to situate L2 creative writers' experiences within a community of practice, resonant with my position of life writing as a social practice. Like Zhao, I take a holistic interpretive stance in relation to "I-statements" and "We- you- statements." For instance, I do not treat "I think" as an "I-statement" because it functions somewhat as a filler in speech. However, depending on the context, clauses like example *a* are taken as "I-statements," in the form of "I can write faster than before." Also, simple present tense in sentences like example *b* are interpreted as a simple past tense because clearly the writer is reflecting on a past state:

a. <u>my writing speed is</u> faster than before.

b. <u>The beginning,</u> I do not like writing, because I think writing the text annoying.

Wherever possible, I triangulated these statements with student writing samples and other textual data to improve validity. I used Dedoose, a user-friendly data importing and coding platform, to facilitate my coding and validating process.

After I coded all the students' written reflections (N=103), I sieved through all the codes to improve my coding scheme by collapsing codes that were too similar and re-organizing the codes based on their relationships with each other. For instance, the codes "teacher's role" and "teacher's impact" were combined to "teacher's impact" and reorganized as a sub-code of "class context." During this process, themes began to emerge to illuminate EFL learners' new writer identity and new practices, as mediated by life writing. Note, however, although textual analysis focuses on "I-statements" and "We- You- statements" in clauses, selecting of quotes and presentation of illustrative cases are always contextualized in their original sentences or paragraphs to facilitate holistic understanding.

Table 1 presents samples of my coding scheme, which was refined through several rounds of analysis until there were no more perceivable inconsistencies.

Code	Description	Example
Emotion	Features the writer's past or present emotions	*I used to don't like writing…*
Self-understanding	Features the writer's evolving understandings	*I found my vocabulary is poor*
Investment	Features the writer's investment in writing	*I have written a lot, to write whatever…*
Plan	Features the writer's hopes and plans	*I hope I can learn more in the future.*

Table 1: Samples of Coding Scheme

The present analysis focused on three students, whom I call Wu, Monica, and Frank, even though anecdotal evidence from other students was also included when appropriate. Quotes from students' writing were edited to improve readability.

Results

Life Writing and Free Writing as Meaningful Literacy

Scaffolded life writing was promoted in the class as meaningful literacy. For instance, at the beginning of the semester, I guided my students in designing their autobiographies by involving them in drawing and labeling life rivers (i.e., a simple sketch of a river to represent one's life or a period of one's life) and designing book titles and chapter titles. I then moved to specific topics like coherence, paragraph development, vivid writing techniques, sentence writing conventions, and rules for diction. Weekly writing tasks asked my students to try to integrate what we had learned that week in class.

To create a safe and low-anxiety environment for sharing personal stories, I often engaged in life writing myself and frequently shared my own samples with my students. When I used student writing samples for class discussion, their names were usually removed. To provide some freedom in genre choice, I adopted an open-ended weekly writing prompt: "Suggested topic: Write a story or about an issue of significance to you." As Appendix 2 shows, my students often wrote their life stories for their weekly writing tasks. On average, each student wrote a passage of 300 words each week.

Classroom free writing also provided another form of meaningful literacy. Originally, free writing involves minimal guidance from the teacher and interactions among the students. The teacher simply tells the students to write whatever goes on in their mind for a few minutes without worrying about making mistakes (Elbow & Belanoff, 2000). Also, the students do not usually share their free writing with each other. In the local context, however, free writing activities usually began with the students "[r]elaxing with music," especially classical music. Then the whole class, including the teacher, would "[w]rite as fast as possible for five minutes whatever is on your mind." Afterwards, the whole class would "[s]hare [their writing] with each other." Based on what the students shared and the problems they manifested through their writing samples (e.g., misspelling "writing" as "writting" or not knowing how to use the word "relaxed" properly), the teacher would then engage the class in "[l]earn[ing] useful expressions" (7P).

Free writing was an immediate win with many of the students. Some students found it enabled them to express their own feelings through writing. As Yan (all participants' names are pseudonyms) reflected:

> With Christmas Day's coming, this semester is going to be over, so is my writing class. What progress have I made? What have I learned in this class? Firstly, **I learned how to express my own feelings in English**. When MR. X **played a piece of light music to us and then he let us write anything that exists in our minds first time, I was really shocked by his teaching style.**

Students' free writing also provided a channel for the students to explore multiple aspects of being human. In Chen's words, free writing allowed her to write down "the words which [are] in my heart and…thoughts in my mind." Sometimes she would use free writing "to encourage myself to become cheerful":

> To be honest, thanks to my teacher, I learn a lot from my writing class, my teacher teaches me how to write an article, he teaches me a lot of writing skills which can make my sentences more and more perfect, **it is my free writing heaven**, and **I can write what I want to write**. In my essay, I can write down the words which in my

*heart and what I want to say, it record[s] a quantity of **thoughts** in my mind. Such as If I am **depressed**, I will try my best to **encourage myself** to become cheerful, and pay attention to **my goal** that I wish will come true in the future, or something I want to do to make my life more and more beautiful. If I am **happy**, I will tell myself to keep it and move on.*

Here, the learner's thoughts, emotions and aspirations all became the content for writing. Take as another example the following self-selected sentences from one student's free writing samples.

1. I think I'll be free after writing class.
2. We are just requiring writing in class.
3. "day by day, I am afraid of weekend coming."
4. I desire to expect the weekend coming, I can sleep long hours, unlike today.
5. my character has two good features, they let me make many friends.

Sentences 1 and 2 describe the writer's feeling during a writing class. Sentences 3 and 4 feature the writer's feelings ("afraid" and "desire") about weekends. Sentence 5 reveals the writer's understanding of her own double-sided character and her relationship with others. Therefore, free writing in this class embodied some of the basic principles of "meaningful literacy" (Hanauer, 2012), involving not only the students' experiences, but also their understandings, not only their thoughts, but also their emotions.

Impact on Writer Identity

No longer fearing writing. One positive change to the students' writer identity brought by life writing is that they were no longer afraid of writing. In particular, the students attributed their lack of fear to the use of a localized form of free writing in the writing class, which six of the 116 students (5%) mentioned in particular.

Students' investment in this form of writing was found to help them to develop a positive relationship with writing. In their reflections, three students mentioned that they used to "fear" writing but not any longer. Their reasons varied, but unanimously, they pointed to how the localized free writing practice—listening to music before and sharing what they wrote afterwards— helped them to disperse their fear. Monica wrote in her reflection,

*I **was afraid of writing, because I was not good at grammar and vocabulary. I also feared to make mistakes**. Through the training of this semester, I felt that I made some progress. **I am not so afraid to write an article by practice over and over again**, especially by free writing. **I felt relaxed when I listened to music before free writing.** I think it is very helpful to my writing in that it can let my heart calm down and keep my mind on. What is the most important thing is that we will communicate with each other after we finished our writing. It could help you to find out your mistakes and shortages and correct. (All emphasis through boldfaces added by the author)*

According to Monica, her fear of writing was caused by her limited "grammar and vocabulary" and fear "to make mistakes." Listening to music helped her to relax, thus preparing her mind for writing. Sharing with classmates then contributed to her learning about and correcting these "mistakes." Thus, Monica mainly focused on the language aspect of writing. In contrast, Frank's struggle related to his lack of content, as well as his view of words. He explained:

*I **used to dread writing in English. I would have nothing more to write after just a few words.** I just could not express my ideas very well. Now I know even with simple words, if you can use them well, they can still help you to express your feelings very well. Only by writing more can you find a feel for writing….I really like the teacher's free writing approach. My mind becomes more open when I listen to light music. I used to think that writing class was boring, but this [class] is different. Each class was finished in a very relaxing way. Thank Teacher X's work, which **helped me to get back my passion for writing**. (My translation from Chinese)*

For both students, fear no longer dominated their writing processes. Instead, they were relaxed through music to engage in creating ideas, or as Monica put it, "keep my mind on." Frank even regained his "passion for writing." For another student Guo, "listening to songs" in class encouraged her to write:

*This is my first time to have [English] writing class. **I feel it is very interesting**, and also like it. Although I don't feel any pressure from the class, **I learn a lot from every class**. Take **free writing** as an example. **Listening to songs makes me feel relaxed and have an impulse to write**. Unlike doing writing assigned by other teachers, with fixed content and time etc. There was a formless pressure, making me not want to write. (My translation from Chinese)*

Therefore, Guo's investment in free writing needs to be understood in her personal context of resisting writing under "a formless pressure," "with fixed content and time etc." A similar change of attitude was also expressed by Wei, who wrote in her reflection titled "*Big harvest*":

> *English writing had always been my weakness. I even felt fearful each time I wrote. I did not know where to start and which word to use. Sometimes I was so anxious that my palm would sweat. I had a feeling that I never want to write English again, just throwing away the pen to do something else. However, after taking the teacher's class, I felt that his class dynamics was very good, his way of teaching unique. He made [us] feel relaxed by listening to music. This seemed to have eliminated my fear. Gradually, I was no longer that afraid of English writing. (My translation from Chinese)*

Taking these examples together, they suggest that free writing in class, sandwiched between listening to music and sharing, was effective in shifting the students' sense of self as writers in English. It became a special kind of meaningful literacy that dispelled the students' "fear" of writing, and in some cases, restored their "passion" for writing.

This study contributes new insight about the positive effects of music on students' writing. The conducive role of music in teaching students to write has been documented occasionally. One of the earliest studies was reported by Donlan (1976), who found that listening to familiar music helped high school students to produce better and longer writing than unfamiliar music did. Researchers like Piazza and Jecko (2003) found music an effective means to generate both topic and content among their second grade participants, with girls tending to write about their "personal experiences and emotional content" (p. 72). Also studying young learners, Kariuki and Honeycutt (1998) found that by listening to music, two emotionally disturbed fourth graders were able to produce better quality basic writing. While previous studies all focus on pre-university students, especially young learners, whose first language is English, my current study suggests that the benefits of listening to music before writing are true for EFL university student writers as well.

Developing a new orientation. Students also wrote in their reflections that they have become more confident as a writer. Take Rong's experience as an example.

> ***I have lerned [learned] a lot from writng [writing] book in this semester****. It's not very rich but turely [truly] I have known everything I should understand in my day. For example, essential techniques of Exposition Writing, how to recognize, the importance of style and word choice and how to remember rules for good sentences and paragraghs* [sic] *how to use transition words and phrases how to select the internal structure of the essay.* ***I don't know why and how it happened to me so suddenly. Before that, I even hated to write, every time I was so guity [guilty] of writing. But now I was not terrified to it. I believe [believe] I will write better, always with confidence****.*

> *I was not sure why so many people like to write, but now I just know I also like to write, because it can help me out of trouble or sadness, I can write the emotions in my dairy [diary]. I hope more students like to write as me.*

Note that life writing, in the form of "writing book," served as a way for Rong to learn and use various skills about English writing such as "how to organize" and "word choices." Note also her change from a negative relationship with writing ("Before that, *I even hated to write*, every time *I was so guity [guilty]* of writing.") to a more positive one ("*But now I was not terrified to it. I believe [believe] I will write better, always with confidence.*"). One possible reason is that life writing provided a refuge for her negative emotions. As she wrote, "because *it can help me out of trouble or sadness, I can write the emotions in my dairy [diary].*" There is a shift from "book" to "diary," suggesting that Rong may have developed a habit of keeping her diary in English. Life writing thus shifted Rong's relationship with writing and herself.

Through life writing, two students said they had formed a habit of regular writing. They reported in their reflection:

> ***I understand*** *a truth,* ***writing is a enjoy[able] thing, it isn't a task****. In a word, we have some friends, among of them, we can share sorrow and happy thoughts, it's just a natural reflection.*

> *What's more, I also devel[o]p a habit of writing English diaries, I believe I would benefit a lot from this habit, and I would keep this habit from now on. (Du)*

> *This term i got many useful skills and came to have a habit that i write a composition every day. (Ying)*

Such new habits, e.g., "write a composition every day," are significant in that they are transitioning into voluntary investment (Yang, 2013), as it is in Du's case, based on a new understanding of writing as "a enjoy[able] thing."

Equally important, the students gained new confidence as writers and habits for writing by reflecting on their foregoing investment in life writing. Consider Bing's reflection below:

> After a semester, **I realized that as long as I try, the more confidence and gains I would get**. I have learned some sentence patterns, such as parallel construction, Subjunctive Sentences and so on.

> On the one hand, **by practicing in every class, I gradually come to be interested in writing**. **After writing my thoughts out, it gives me another different feeling, which makes me more real. On the other hand, my writing speed is faster than before**.

> What I benefit most from my writing course is to be precise instead of writing in a totally casual way. **I've got into the habit of consulting my dictionary when I'm confused, especially in out-of-class writing assignments**.

Here, Bing's increased confidence and interest in writing are based on his very experiences of writing regularly. It shows the emergence of an agentive writer identity, which emphasizes his new self-understanding "that as long as I try, the more confidence and gains I would get." In other words, he realized his success as a writer relies on his efforts and investment, rather than some innate quality as a writer. Further, the writing experience shaped his sense of self. Writing, both as a process and product, provided an experiential basis for narratively constructing his writer identity, a sense of feeling "more real." Last, his approach to "out-of-class writing" also changed, adding to it now a "habit of consulting my dictionary."

Note that two students linked life and literacy closely in their reflections. They wrote:

> This semester's writing class made me think a lot. Life is the source of learning. Writing cannot be separated from life. To write down everyday thoughts and feelings in the form of an essay is a kind of attitude towards life. (Dong, My translation from Chinese)

> In my view, somehow, writing is som[e]thing like telling a story or writing diaries. You just need to say whatever you want to. You are free at those time[s]. And also you are honest story teller. (Xiao)

Dong's comments highlight again the importance of meaningful literacy (Hanauer, 2012) to connect with the writer's mind ("thoughts") and heart ("feelings"). Xiao's words go further to suggest her new orientation as an "honest story teller." In the case of these EFL writers, life writing has effectively channeled the students' emergent subjectivities in connection to their daily experiences.

Even for those who have not expressed profound changes, there is evidence that they were moving in a new direction as writers based on their new understandings about writing. For example, one student wrote:

> The beginning, I do not like writing, because I think writing the text annoying. But after a semester of learning, writing course changed my views on writing. I think writing can express their feelings, with the words to express their feelings, what a romantic thing! (Ni)

Ni's comments again suggest that meaningful literacy, embodying students' emotions, has much to offer in shifting writer identities.

Seven students also reflected explicitly on the positive change that happened to their voice or ways of being present in text. Consider the following reflections:

> In my view, somehow, writing is something like telling a story or writing diaries. **You just need to say whatever you want to**. You are free at those time. And also **you are honest story teller**. In this semester, I learnt a lot of skills in writing, such as, how to make my writing more completed and attractive. I have known that **a good article** need not only some beautiful words or sentences, but **also my true feelings, as well**. (Xu)

> 自己的思想多了一些. 在写作的同时会融入自己的情感。 [There is more of my own thought and I also begin to inject more of my emotions in my writing.] (Juan)

> 通过写作课的学习, **我能够更好的用英语来表现自我，用英语或多或少的发表自己的见解**。 [From this writing course, I learned **to show myself** better in English and can more or less use English **to express my own opinions**]) (Yang)

It is significant to note that these students all emphasize their growing capacity to use English writing to express their own thoughts and emotions and "true feelings." One student Hu even wrote that she was gradually forming "属于我的一种 style" (*a style that belongs to myself*). These examples highlight the impact of "*this writing course*" (see Yang's reflection above) as a whole had on the students' voice.

Although it is dangerous to equate "*this writing course*" with life writing, Zhang's reflection below again suggests the unique place and space life writing had in the writing course and its undeniable impact on students' voice.

> *At the very beginning of this semester, I expected that the writing class was offered for us to acquire specific writing skills and knowledge on TEM-4 [a national English exam for English major students] and I had already been fully prepared to have the tedious writing class every week, to* **bury my heads into the endless writing topics relevant to TEM-4***.*
>
> *…*
> *The most valuable experience on the writing class was "Writing with your own voices", which* **allowed me to think and write from all conceivable angles** *and* **enhanced the "I-CAN-WRITE" confidence***, instead of the "I-CAN-IMITATE" thoughts.*

While writing for TEM-4 may allow some expression of personal thought for sure, the writing course provided more freedom, enabling the writer "to think and write from all conceivable angles."

<u>Taking life writing as a craft.</u> The students' active investment in life writing had a positive impact on their take on writing itself. Take Wu as an example. During the semester, she produced thirteen samples online, ten of which were explicitly autobiographical, with both her personal experiences and insights (see Appendix 2). For instance, Wu wrote about her different understanding about happiness: "When I was young, happiness was simple; now that I've grown up, simplicity is happiness." She also wrote about the changes she faced in her first work experience, "Tongue plugged, face blushed, scalp tingled, direction messed, these are the words I want to use to describe my first work experience." In *His Tears I Don't Know*, her self-selected best sample of the semester, Wu wrote about a conflict she had with her father when she was still a teenager. Going home one day, she discovered that her father had sold all her high school books. She was enraged. In her writing, she masterfully used dialogues and specific action verbs (e.g., rushed), two of the several ways to write vividly that the class learned together, to recapture the intensity of her reactions.

> *With tears welling up in my eyes, I couldn't help crying out loud. I rushed over to the downstairs to ask my father what happened to my books on earth. He looked puzzled to my behaviors and answered, "It has been sold." I couldn't believe my ears, it nearly drove me mad, "What? Sold? Who the hell allows you to do so? I have told you before, don't touch my books, even a piece of paper. Now what have you done to them? I can't believe you should have sold them. How can you be so cruel? How did you dare to do it?"*

Later, Wu went to school. She would not receive her father's phone call. Only when her mother called her did she know that her father "was so grieved that he could not fall asleep that night." "However, what is out of my imagination is that my mother said my father even wept uncontrollably that night. I was shocked after hearing it."

> *I could hardly remember my father's tears, because within my memory, I merely saw the tears rolled down his face when I attended my grandfather's funeral. Accordingly, you may guess my feeling at the moment I realized my behaviors brought tears to my father's eyes. No matter how I angry with him, I was genuinely bitterly remorseful. After all, he is my father. How could I hurt the one who love me most?*
>
> *After finishing my call with mother. I sat there in a daze for a long time, tears coming down my cheeks. Suddenly I was aware of there were so many things in life I did not understand.*

Life writing in English thus offered Wu a chance to remember this particular experience. Although the story ended still in a past tense (e.g., "I sat there in a daze"), her growth as a writer did not.

In her own reflection, Wu first revealed her former writer identity:

> *I was not a person good at writing. Although I always had much in my mind that I wanted to write down, every time after I wrote, I would find the words and sentences that I wrote [in English] could not really express my feelings. That was why each writing was a headache for me. (My translation from Chinese).*

In other words, being unable to express her "feelings" through English made Wu feel that she was not a good writer. Wu then explained in Chinese her reasons for investing in life writing. First, she and her classmates were encouraged by her teacher's way of teaching to think and write freely, "We can write about what I think and express what I think without being confined to a particular topic and without any pressure. This helped us to take a bold step in writing—thinking." Wu's conflated use of both "we" and "I" indicates that her life writing was both personal and social; personal in that it recorded her own life experiences and social in that exploring life experiences through English writing was a collective endeavor

for the whole class. Second, writing facilitated her learning of the English language. As Wu wrote, "Then we started writing. Once we start writing, we begin to realize our problems in vocabulary, grammar, and logic. Knowing the problems is the first step before solving the problems." In a way, writing externalizes the students' knowledge about the English language, providing visible signs of what they students can do independently. Third, classroom instruction then served to scaffold Wu's learning. "In class, the teacher's instruction on specific topics of writing [such as how to write vividly] helped us to solve our problems even better." According to Wu, her change was accumulative. "By keeping doing it for a semester, I changed from being resistant to writing to having the courage to write to further forming a habit of refining each sentence for a better one. This is perhaps my biggest change." Clearly, Wu's sustained investment in life writing, as supported by her teacher, shifted her sense of self as a writer. She was no longer a writer restrained by failing words and sentences, but a writer who crafted her writing, with "a habit of refining each sentence."

Conclusion

Featuring life writing, this study provides empirical evidence that engaging EFL learners in "meaningful literacy" (Hanauer, 2012), in the form of life writing, has a positive impact on them as writers. Life writing, involving both story writing outside class and a localized form of free writing in class, shifted the students' relationship with writing. Through extensive engagement in writing their autobiographies and free writing, the students no longer feared writing. They began to develop new confidence as writers and new writing habits. Despite their initial "compulsory" investment in life writing, as required by the writing course, many of the students began to show signs of voluntary investment in their writing through constantly working on "refining each sentence" or "consulting [a] dictionary" to improve the word choice of their writing or engaging in self-initiated writing activities such as keeping a diary in English or writing to friends in English. Their frequent investment in life writing then became an experience, with textual evidence as through their collections of best sentences, upon which they reflected and generated newer understandings of themselves as writers in English. Over all, their reflections suggest that life writing has the potential to develop agentive writer identities, i.e., writers who have a positive, active, and rewarding relationship with writing in a foreign language.

The study also shows that free writing, preceded by music and followed by sharing of produced texts, can be an effective way of providing "meaningful literacy" (Hanauer, 2012) in the EFL university writing class. This is because in a relaxing classroom environment, the students are free to write about their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, all critical contents for meaningful literacy. A poststructuralist theory, as introduced in this study, thus proves useful in understanding learners' investment in life writing; it reveals free writing as a channel through which EFL writers explore their multiple identities and complexities as humans. A lens of learners' writer identities through their written reflections also helped to explain how identity can be both changing and have the potential to stay the same (Menard-Warwick, 2005). In particular, while writer is the identity category that is evoked again and again, the students were drawing different and more agentive "identity conclusions" (White, 1995) about themselves based on their life writing and free writing experiences.

As descriptive research, this study is limited in that it relied on anecdotal evidence from one classroom. Therefore, it is less clear how the identified themes resonate with other classes. This can be remedied in future studies that integrate other types of data (e.g., interviews) and data from other creative writing classes or combine a qualitative and quantitative approach. Despite these limitations, however, it seems safe to suggest that life writing, as used in this study, needs to be made at least as an option in contexts where English literacy education is provided. As the students write about their life experiences, thoughts, and emotions, they are participating in meaningful literacy, which may expand their identity options to also become agentive writers.

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Appendix 1

A list of writing prompts and students' writing during the semester

Tasks	Sample titles or themes
1. Topic: The most important things to me. What are they? Why are they important? (length: 300-600 words)	*parents; youth*
2. Draft one or two book titles and five to ten chapter titles. Try to create your own titles with proper capitalization. (Length: 20-200 words)	*A Crazy Donkey [Book title followed by twelve chapter titles]*
3. Write a complete story of your life or any topic of particular interest or importance to you. A suggested topic: The Day I Was Born. Interview people who know about your birth to find out more about the day you were born. (Length: 400-800 words)	*The Day I Was Born*
4. Suggested topic: Write a story or about an issue of significance to you. (Length: 400-1,000 words)	*There are no mistakes, only lessons*
5. Suggested topic: My first time to...Work out a title of your own; try develop a vivid description. (Length: 400-1,000 words)	*My first time to travel with my friends*
6. Suggested writing this week: Write a story of your own; try to use specific action verbs to make your writing vivid. (Length: 400-1,000 words)	*Rose Presented, Smell Remained*
7. Write a complete story or revise your earliest story this semester, using the strategies we learned in class. If a new story, submit directly; if a revision, submit both, indicating respectively as "Original" and "Revision." (Length: 100-1,500 words)	*My First Experience As a Teacher*
8. Write a new story or essay about something of particular interest or importance to you. Alternatively, you may revisit a story or essay you wrote before and revise it, particularly in terms of its coherence, i.e., how well one sentence links to the next. [A sample revision omitted] Consider mainly these five dimensions [in your writing or revision]: Details: relevant? Order: clear (time, space, or logic)? Key words: repeated? Any parallelism (平行结构) Transitional expressions: Needed? Proper? (Length: 450-1600)	*The City, the Love, and the Song---Comments on Breakfast At Tiffany's*
9. Recommended: 1) Just write what you feel like writing. 2) Or write a story of your life. Pay special attention to how one event relates to another when developing your paragraphs and passage. 3) Or research and describe how to prepare your favorite dish. Pay close attention to showing the detailed steps so that your readers can actually reproduce your dish by following your descriptions. After you are done writing, you may search online for related recipes to see if you need to improve your writing in any way. (Length: 200-1,000 words)	*The Age of Innocence---Comments on The Perks of Being a Wallflower*
10. Recommended writing: Consider a social problem that always occupies your mind and ask yourself why. Then use a Cause-and-Effect way of developing paragraphs in your writing. Remember, you can always write about anything of importance or interest to you. (Length: 400-1,000)	*Causes of School Violence*
11. Recommended: Read an article you particularly like. Pay close attention to how the writer starts the passage, i.e., the use of hooks to bridge into the topic. Start your own passage in a similar way. (Length: 450-1,000)	*His Tears I Don't Know*
12. [Semester reflection] 学期反思：1. 整理本学期写作: a. 从本学期写的所有（课内、课外）英文作品中每篇选一句写得最好的抄在一起；b. 给句子集写一个中文标题、再写一个英文标题；2. 写一两段段话(可用中文、英文或结合）描述这个学期在写作方面自己的变化。(Length: 300-1,500)	*Meditations*（沉思录）
13. Best sample from the semester, revised and to present at the student writers' conference	*His Tears I Don't Know*

Appendix 2

A prompt for semester reflection

学期反思：

1. 整理本学期写作

    a. 从本学期写的所有（课内、课外）英文作品中每篇选一句写得最好的抄在一起；

    b. 给句子集写一个中文标题、再写一个英文标题；

2. 写一两段段话(可用中文、英文或结合）描述这个学期在写作方面自己的变化；

投交至：Yangshizhou.pigai.org

截至日期：下周二中午

长度：300-1，500 单词

分值：10 分

Semester reflection:

1. Organize your own writing samples from this semester:

    a. Select one best sentence from each of your English writing samples, both from in- and out-class writing and compile these sentences together;

    b. create a Chinese title and then an English title for your sentence collection.

2. Write one or two paragraphs (in Chinese, English or a combination of both) to describe how your writing has changed. (Length: 300-1,500 words)

Worth: 10 points