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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MALAYSIAN LEARNERS' SELF-CONCEPT AND ENGAGEMENT IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the relationship between Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing and their engagement in the academic writing class. A mixed methods approach was adopted, with an initial survey of 170 students, followed by two semi-structured interviews with each of eight student participants. The quantitative findings ascertained that a positive relationship existed between self-concept in academic writing and student engagement. Further exploration in the qualitative phase affirmed this and identified the nature of the links between the two constructs. The findings revealed that students' self-concepts in academic writing and engagement were dynamic constructs in that they were influenced by multiple internal and external factors from students' past and present contexts. They were therefore susceptible to change, and developmental in nature. Both self-concept in academic writing and engagement were found to play an important role in helping students adapt to their new academic context and learning demands, since the intertwining ecologies of self-concept in academic writing and engagement appear to tap a common motivational element related to goals and future self. The findings of this study suggest that students may benefit from writing support and a writing curriculum that is discipline-specific to help enhance their self-concepts, academic identity and academic legitimacy. It is also suggested that an extensive professional development program be provided for instructors and institutions to cope with any major curriculum and policy changes.

**Keyword:** Student engagement, self-concept, academic writing, academic literacy, English as a second language (ESL), Malaysia.

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## INTRODUCTION

At tertiary level, Malaysian students are often required to take English language preparatory courses as part of their academic literacy programs. The required preparatory papers are aimed at providing learners with the necessary skills and knowledge required at degree level and also to build their academic literacy. These English language courses also aim at equipping students with the necessary language skills, which would enable them to function effectively within an academic environment. An example of a typical course objective from one university is as follows:

The course focuses on writing for specific purposes, in particular technical writing that students are expected to produce. Students will be given practice in the techniques of gathering technical information and critical writing. In addition, students will be exposed to techniques of gathering technical information, proper language usage and acceptable writing standards. (Universiti Teknologi Mara, 2012, Retrieved from [apb.uitm.edu.my](http://apb.uitm.edu.my))

In general, academic literacy refers to the knowledge and ability to read and write for academic purposes, in order to function effectively at tertiary level. For second language (L2) learners, academic literacy is defined as follows:

For non-native English writers, second language (L2) advanced academic literacy encompasses knowledge of the rhetorical, linguistic, social and cultural features of academic discourse as well as knowledge of English as used by their academic disciplines. Literacy is acquired through a socialization process embedded in social practice, patterned by social institutions and interactions between learners and their academic discourse community members (Ferenz, 2005, p. 339).

Within the Malaysian tertiary context, academic writing lessons can be perceived as a platform that provides these learners with academic literacy. At this level, learners are taught different types of academic conventions; the incorporation of multiple sources in their writing; the correct acknowledgment of these sources and engagement in academic criticism. Linguistic features and knowledge of the discipline are also embedded in the curricula of academic writing. However, recent research on Malaysian learners' use of English in higher learning institutions has revealed that these L2 learners still face challenges. Despite having learned the subject for eleven years, they "struggle to comprehend advanced level reading texts in English ... lack reading skills and are not critical readers" (Shafie & Nayan, 2011, p.2). This problem also affects their writing skills.

That the national language was used for decades as a medium of instruction at all educational levels in Malaysia also contributes to the minimal role that English plays in certain parts of the country. Gill (2005) contended that "in the rural areas where there was almost no environmental exposure to the language, English was virtually a foreign language" (p. 244). Hence, a critical issue raised is that the English level that students have reached upon entering university will clearly vary and there will be a gap



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between urban and rural-based students. This would add further complexities and challenges in learning academic writing (in L2) at tertiary level.

Learning academic writing in English in the Malaysian context may present social and cultural challenges. In fact, Rajadurai (2010) found that the meaning represented by the English language and the act of learning English could be interpreted by some Malaysian students as an erosion of their national and cultural identities. Students of certain ethnicities may perceive that learning academic writing in English contradicts the early initiatives of relegating English to the status of a foreign or second language. Consequently, the cultural conflict represented by English (as a medium of instruction) may result in students' ambivalence, partial tolerance and resistance, and even absolute rejection of the language and the subject (Canagarajah, 1999). Since Malaysia has a complex linguistic situation, due to its post-colonial history, the position of English language use is contentious.

Self-concept which encompasses perceptions, knowledge and beliefs that learners have about themselves plays a critical role in determining the type of learners they are and the level of commitment they invest in learning, in other words, their engagement. This parallels Pajares and Valiente's (1999) stance which states, "What students believe about themselves and about their academic competence helps determine what they do with the knowledge and skills they possess" (p. 390). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has been no research exploring the relationship between Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing and their engagement in the Academic Writing class. Additionally, international research has not investigated the links between self-concept, student engagement and academic writing in L2 concurrently. This study attempts to address these gaps in order to offer critical insights into the dynamic nature of learning academic writing in a second language, and further improve the tertiary writing curricula in Malaysia and internationally.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic self-concept is often viewed as an important educational outcome and is particularly pertinent to this study. Defined as "knowledge and perceptions about themselves [learners] in achievement situations" (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 6), awareness of academic self-concept has contributed immensely to assisting educational attainments. In fact, academic self-concept has cemented its position in psychology and educational psychology, as can be seen through rigorous research on self-concept resulting in recommendations for instructors to enhance positive self-concepts in the academic setting (Chiu & Klassen, 2009; Kornilova, Kornilov, & Chumakova, 2009; Rodriguez, 2009).

The importance of academic self-concept is largely attributed to its strong correlations with motivation and academic achievement. Researchers have capitalized on this knowledge to test the causal ordering of self-concept and achievement (Marsh, Craven, & McInerney, 2005; Marsh, Koller, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Baumert, 2005) and to interpret students' educational performance (Areepattamannil & Freeman,



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2008; Choi, 2005; Marsh, Hau, & Kong, 2002; Ommundsen, Haugen, & Lund, 2005; Silverthorn, Dubois, & Crombie, 2005). The mutually reinforcing nature of self-concept and academic achievements have paved the way for researchers to better understand learners by looking at their past to better understand who they are today, and how this may possibly shape who they will become in the future (prior achievement affects subsequent academic self-concept and vice versa).

Academic self-concept provides useful insight into human behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Learners' academic self-concept may be reflected in aspects of students' behavior and their engagement. In particular, the predictive power of academic self-concept is vital to this study as it may provide possible explanations for the learners' pursuit or abandonment of academic writing challenges as seen through their engagement in the learning process. However, this exploration can only be achieved if the issue of context specificity is addressed adequately. Marsh and O'Mara (2008) sum it up aptly by saying: "When the focus of a study is on educational outcomes, it is important to focus on academic components of self-concept" (p. 548).

Early research on academic self-concept such as the study by Marsh (1986) proposed the Internal/External model to represent the comparative processes involved in formulating academic self-concepts. To illustrate, for an external frame of reference for math self-concept, students would "compare their self-perceptions of their own math and verbal abilities with the perceived abilities of other students in their frame of reference" (Marsh, 1986, p. 133). Conversely, for an internal frame of reference, students would form their math self-concept on the basis of their self-concepts in other academic areas. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2002) expanded on the notion of internal and external frames of reference and the possible sources of external frames of reference. In their study, social comparison includes processes whereby "a student compares his or her own performance with the perceived performance of another, which may be a comparison group or a comparison person" (p. 234).

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

Although knowledge is increasing about what influences the academic self-concept, the extensive literature with regard to academic self-concept has also revealed the gap in terms of non-Western participants and context.



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While no one can argue the differential cultural values between Western and non-Western contexts, one must ask what elements are critical in explicating Malaysian learners' self-concept in order to better understand the procedural nature of self-concept. Based on the current literature in self-concept, it is possible that Malaysian learners' academic self-concept, specifically self-concept in academic writing, could be influenced differently within the Malaysian educational setting.

Thus, the key research questions for this study were formulated as follows:

1. What self-concepts do Malaysian learners' have in the context of their Academic Writing class?
2. What are the influences on Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing and their engagement in the Academic Writing class?

Self-concept is a starting point to understand why learners behave in a certain way in the Academic Writing class. Upon determining what their self-concepts are, the emphasis will be on exploring the relationship between their self-concept in academic writing and their engagement in the class. Specifically, the nature of this relationship and its influences are explored to understand why learners engage or disengage in the writing classroom.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilized a mixed methods design, in which priority was given to the qualitative phase. This approach was seen as instrumental in providing comprehensive evidence with regard to student engagement in academic writing. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches was intended to provide various types of data, thus giving the research the rigor, and also quantitative breadth and qualitative depth (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Figure 1 provides a visual model of the sequential investigative procedures for the study. This shows the two phases with the respective procedures of data collection and data analysis. This visual model also elucidates the nature of data produced for each phase.



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Phase	Procedure	Product
<b>Phase One</b> Quantitative Data Collection	Cross-sectional questionnaire	Numeric data
Quantitative Data Analysis	Descriptive analysis Grouped frequencies Factor analysis Correlational analysis SPSS 16 software	Descriptive statistics Factor loadings Correlational coefficient
Connecting Qualitative and Quantitative	Purposeful selection of participants with a range of self-concepts Development of interview questions	Cases Interview protocol
<b>Phase Two</b> Qualitative Data Collection	Individual in-depth semi- structured interviews conducted	Text data (interview transcripts, and researcher's notes)
Qualitative Data Analysis	Coding and thematic analysis Within-case and across-case theme development Cross-thematic analysis NVivo 8 software	Visual model of multiple case analysis Codes and themes Similar and different themes categories
Integration of The Quantitative and Qualitative Result	Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results	Findings Discussion Implication

*Figure 1. Visual Model for the Sequential Mixed Methods Procedures [Adapted from "Using Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design: From Theory to practice" by N. V. Ivankova et al., 2006, *Field Meth Methods*, 18, p.16]*



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### ***Instrument***

The first phase of this study utilized a questionnaire. As it is widely accepted that research into self-concept needs to be carried out in domain-specific ways (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008), a self-report questionnaire was created specifically to investigate Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing. Responses for the 18 items on self-concept in academic writing were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1= False; 2= Mostly False, 3 = Mostly True, 4= True). Self-concept in academic writing was explored through statements such as '*I am hopeless when it comes to academic writing*' and '*I feel confident in my ability to write in English*'. In Phase One, quantitative data aimed at providing statistically significant findings regarding student engagement in academic writing. The quantitative data and statistical results were expected to provide a general understanding of the issue at hand and the qualitative data and its analysis would then explain in detail, the influences of self-concept in academic writing (in L2) for individual students. Of the 199 questionnaires sent out, 170 were returned.

In the qualitative phase, each student was interviewed twice to increase the depth and richness of the data. This allowed the complexity and distinctness of engagement to be further understood by the researcher through a selected profile of students, identified from the first (quantitative) phase. The interviews took a maximum of one hour per student and were digitally audio-recorded. The gap between the first and second interviews in each case was no more than one week. The interviews were conducted in English and *Bahasa Melayu*, the native language of the research subjects and the researcher. The interview process was flexible (Janesick, 2000) in that more questions were added, refined and readjusted in the subsequent interviews following emergent findings. The analysis of data from this qualitative phase was supported by the use of NVivo 8 software.

In this qualitative phase, case study (Stake, 2000) was utilized. Students who represented a range of perspectives from Phase One were selected for Phase Two case study. A grouped frequency distribution was used (in Phase One) to produce student profiles for the next phase. Ravid (2005) indicates that frequency distributions of scores allow the organizing and graphing of data in such a way that distributions can be compared and patterns observed. To help determine the number of groups, the formula  $\text{Groups} = R/i$  was utilized as a guide. Each self-concept level was then assigned its corresponding frequency through a simple tally. This grouped frequency distribution thus helped facilitate selection of a range of participants for Phase Two (i.e., high, medium and low self-concept in academic writing). Nunan (1992) maintained that case studies are advantageous as a great deal can be learnt "in general from a detailed study of one particular student" (p. 89). Case studies have also been said to provide rich insights through depth of analysis (Gerring, 2007). In this study, the detailed data in the case studies were expected to reveal salient influences on the nature of the relationships between self-concept in academic writing and engagement, and insights into the outcomes of such influences.





In particular, each case might reveal how the interaction between a student's self-concept and engagement is experienced and enacted at different levels (personal and social) within the AW class context. In this way, accounts of the learners' self-concepts in academic writing could be meaningfully connected to their actions and engagement in the classroom.

### ***Participant***

The participants in the first phase of the study were selected with opportunity and convenience taken into account (Bryman, 2008). As the chosen university offered the academic writing (AW) paper (in the AW class) to help students with their academic and language competencies as a requirement at this higher learning institution, all the students who were currently taking the AW paper were invited to participate. Some 199 students were enrolled in the AW class in Semester One. These participants were from different faculties such as Economics and Business, Engineering, Computer Science and Information Technology, and Social Science. Students who represented a range of perspectives (i.e., high, medium and low self-concept in academic writing) from Phase One were selected for Phase Two case studies.

### **FINDINGS OF PHASE ONE**

Of the 199 questionnaires sent out, 170 were returned, resulting in a positive 85% response rate. Phase One results raised several critical issues regarding Malaysian learners' self-concept in academic writing. The analysis identified an overall positive response to academic writing and the AW class whereby an overwhelming 98% of the students stated that academic writing is very important for their future endeavors (See Table 1).

Table 1  
*Distribution of Responses for Self-Concept in Academic*

Item	Mean	SD	Distribution of responses (%)			
			F	MF	MT	T
SC18 It is important for me to do well in academic writing	3.56	.564	0.6	1.8	38.2	59.4
SC17 I enjoy studying for academic writing	3.10	.812	5.3	12.4	49.4	32.9
SC24 I make a lot of mistakes when writing in English*	2.86	.859	22.9	47.6	21.8	7.6
SC10 I always look forward to my Academic Writing	2.71	.866	11.2	22.4	50.6	15.9





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SC14	I often do badly in academic writing tests*	2.60	.873	14.7	41.8	32.4	11.2
SC23	I feel confident in my ability to write in English	2.55	.877	10.6	38.8	35.3	15.3
SC15	I have poor writing skills*	2.30	.876	8.8	31.2	41.2	18.8
SC11	Tasks in Academic Writing classes are easy for me	2.26	.824	17.6	45.3	30.6	6.5
SC13	I often need help in the Academic Writing class*	2.15	.833	7.1	21.8	50	21.2
SC25	I have always done well in academic writing	2.15	.789	20	50	25.3	4.7
SC22	I am hopeless when it comes to academic writing*	2.08	.843	5.3	23.5	44.7	26.5
SC21	Academic writing is easy for me	2.00	.746	23.5	57.1	15.3	4.1
SC26	I consider myself a good writer	1.98	.745	25.9	53.5	17.6	2.9

Note. F = False; MF = Mostly False; MT = Mostly True; T = True. SD= Standard Deviation.

a \* Refer to negatively worded statements.

Nonetheless, despite their overall positive responses, the theme that emerged from the analysis was that students' self- concept in academic writing was influenced by their writing skills, writing abilities, and writing strategies, and therefore (in this phase) these challenges seem to be proficiency-based.

The analysis on engagement items identified that a majority of learners appear to be highly engaged students in the AW class, since an overwhelming majority agreed that it was important for them to do well in the paper (See Table 2). The majority of the respondents appeared to be persistent and hardworking in their academic studies. Nonetheless, this finding contrasted with results regarding their academic writing process such as writing minimal drafts. The majority of the respondents also reported an affinity for the writing class and that they valued the time spent in the class learning academic writing.



Table 2  
*Distribution of Responses for Engagement in Academic Writing*

Item	Mean	SD	Distribution of			
			F	MF	MT	T
E36 I think that AW is important for my future	3.64	.571	1.2	1.2	30	67.6
E43 I feel that Academic writing helps me to do well in my content papers						
E41 I often look for ways to improve my English writing	3.36	.631	1.2	4.7	50.6	43.5
E38 In class, I really care that I do my best work	3.33	.651	0	10	47.1	42.9
E39 Writing in English helps me organize my ideas	3.24	.684	2.9	5.3	56.5	35.3
E29 When writing gets difficult, I stop trying*	3.18	.804	38.8	44.7	12.4	4.1
E28 I do as little as possible; I just want to pass*	3.09	.830	34.1	46.5	14.1	5.3
E27 I work hard in my AW class	3.01	.758	4.1	15.9	55.3	24.7
E32 I prepare two or more drafts of an assignment before final submission						
E44 I find it hard to express my ideas effectively in English*	3.58	.613	62.9	32.9	2.9	1.2

Note. F = False; MF = Mostly False; MT = Mostly True; T = True. SD= Standard Deviation.  
a \* Refer to negatively worded statements

In order to establish the relationship between self-concept in academic writing and student engagement, Pearson product moment correlation analysis was conducted. The result indicated a moderate ( $r = .504^{**}$ ;  $p < .01$ ) positive relationship between self-concept in academic writing and engagement that was significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). These results suggested that the students' self-concept in academic writing and the students' engagement might increase, in the same direction and in the same manner. The calculated coefficient of determination identified the magnitude of the relation between the two variables (See Table 3). Since  $r = .504^{**}$ ,  $r^2 = 0.254$  suggested that 25% of the variation in engagement could be explained by self-concept in academic writing.



Table 3

*Coefficient of Determination ( $r^2$ )*

Model 1	$r$	$r^2$	Adjusted r Squared	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.504**	.254	.250	4.2397

*Note.*  $r$  = Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.  $r^2$  = Coefficient of Determination.

<sup>a</sup> \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

In response to Research Question Two, the quantitative analysis found that a positive relationship existed between self-concept in academic writing and the students' engagement in the AW class. Additionally, the results offered strong empirical support of the proposition that the relationship between Malaysian learners' self-concept factors in academic writing and engagement is associated distinctly with specific constructs of engagement, such as the value of academic writing, independent academic engagement, and the challenges of academic writing. Although the factors that have emerged are in line with the literature, the level of correlation ( $r = .504^{**}$ ) implies that other variables may be influencing the relationship between self-concept in academic writing and student engagement (beyond those revealed answers to the questionnaire).

The findings of the quantitative results affirmed that little can be assumed with regard to the nature of the relationship between self-concept and engagement. The spread of scores for statements on self-concept in academic writing which do not seem to impact on the students' engagement responses, suggested there would be value in qualitative exploration, since the influences on such a distribution of responses was beyond the parameters of this phase. The interview topics were constructed based on themes emerging from the questionnaire data (as summarized in Table 4).

Table 4

*Overview of Emerging Themes Based on Quantitative Analysis*

Themes emerging from Phase One	
Self-concept in academic writing	Challenges in academic writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing skills</li> <li>• Proficiency issues</li> </ul>
	Variation of self-concept in academic writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Majority average-high self-concept in academic writing</li> </ul>
	The value of academic writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Important for future</li> <li>• Difficulties / Challenges</li> </ul>



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Student engagement in academic writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highly engaged student</li><li>• Persistent and determined</li><li>• Minimal drafts produced as part of academic writing process</li><li>• Value the academic writing class</li><li>• Perceive significant relevance of academic writing for their future</li><li>• Proficiency poses a challenge for cognitive engagement</li></ul>
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Relationship between self-concept and engagement in academic writing	<p>Correlational analysis of relationship between self-concept and engagement in academic writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Moderate positive relationship (<math>r = .504^{**}</math>; <math>p &lt; .01</math>)</li><li>• 25% variance is explainable by self-concept in academic writing</li><li>• 75% are unknown factor(s) to be explored in Phase Two</li></ul>
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## FINDINGS OF PHASE TWO

The learner reported in this article, Mustafa [pseudonym] was selected for several reasons. His qualitative data were particularly rich, detailed and showed how he uniquely conceptualized the relationship between self-concept and engagement in the academic writing class.

### ***Mustafa: Holding on to my L1***

Mustafa was a 21 year old Biotechnology student. He scored Band 3 in his MUET exams indicating that he was not a proficient user of academic English. Mustafa hails from Peninsular Malaysia and is the third of seven siblings. His two older brothers are educated; one is working as a teacher and the other is currently studying at a different university. Having several younger siblings still in school, Mustafa explained that he helped them with homework when he could; especially if it was a Science or Mathematics subject in English. He clarified that it was his responsibility as an older brother to ensure that they did well in their studies since his parents were unable to do so. He explained, *"They [parents] did not finish school. My parents are not educated"* (Interview 1, 4th August, 2014). In the questionnaire, Mustafa ranked his self-concept in academic writing highly. However, in the interviews, he evaluated his self-concept in academic writing as *"average"*.



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Because of his parents' circumstances, education seemed to be regarded very highly in this family. Mustafa stated that at age 12 he was sent to tuition classes so that he could do well in his Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Achievement Test). This investment paid off, as Mustafa did well in the exams, and was selected to go to a boarding school at the young age of 13. This residential school was religion-oriented, and learning Arabic was compulsory. Mustafa consistently did well in his studies and, soon after the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary Examination), he was accepted by another residential school to continue his upper secondary studies and continued his academic success in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education). Mustafa also showed great interest in the constant changes in Malaysia's education policies. This was evident in the interview data in which Mustafa was depicted as having strong national sentiments. In this regard, it is likely that Mustafa's conflicting self-concepts explained his need to hold on to his L1.

### ***Self-concept in academic writing***

Mustafa's case is very interesting in that his self-concept in academic writing was shaped by the learning culture of his past learning institution, conflicting policies and protection of his core self. In tracing his prior learning experiences, it soon became evident that Mustafa had undergone a gradual development of self-concept in English. In fact, Mustafa was one of two students in the study with feelings of ambivalence toward the English language. He acknowledged the importance of the English language but said this does not transcend outside his student life. Mustafa explained, "*English is not a big deal for me. I just learn it as my friends learn. I don't speak English everyday*" (Interview 1, 4th August).

Mustafa recollected that it was at his last secondary school that his view, and thus his self-concept in English, gradually changed from initial desire to separate his self-concept from identification with English. Using his own words, Mustafa described that the upper secondary school was "*more advanced*" (than his previous school) and the teacher they had in that school was of a higher caliber, *Guru Cemerlang*. He also admitted that although he was initially sceptical, the prolonged exposure to English in this new context eventually encouraged him to participate in these classes. The change was perhaps driven by his awareness of the utility of the English language. He attributed the change to the teaching and learning culture in the residential school. This environment and the teachers he had there facilitated his learning of English and contributed to his language learning.

Despite acknowledging the utility of English in his own learning experience, Mustafa admitted that English as a medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics may not benefit everyone. He explained this by drawing from his experience of helping his younger sister with her mathematics homework:



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*“She is in Standard 5. Sometimes I help her with her homework. She finds it difficult to understand. For primary students, they don’t have the foundation or understanding of the basic principles. In my case, we have learnt the principles [of Mathematics] and basics in Malay. So when everything was changed [to English] in Form 4, we just have to change the terms only. But for the primary students, they have to start from zero” (Interview 1, 4th August).*

Mustafa also indicated that the objective of implementing English in the rural areas as a medium of instruction would be null and void due to the socio-economic gap. He recollected a story told by his brother, who is a mathematics teacher in a rural school, *“He [Mustafa’s brother] said ... in one test, the whole class didn’t answer any question. So the whole class got zero marks because they didn’t understand the questions” (Interview 1, 4th August).* When asked about his thoughts regarding the change of medium of instruction to Malay language for Science and Mathematics, Mustafa responded *“I think it [the change] is good” (Interview 1, 4th August).* He emphasized how it would benefit rural students (who are predominantly Malay): *“Because they [rural students] couldn’t understand [Science and Mathematics being taught in English]. So the change is good.” (Interview 1, 4th August).* In the interview, Mustafa also expressed his frustration regarding the constant changes of medium of instruction as it impacted on his own learning. He explained:

*“But now everything is back to BM [his content papers in university are now being taught in Malay language] so it’s hard for us ... because we have been taught Science and Maths in English since Form 4 ... the resources for Biotech are in English and it’s hard to translate [into Malay language]” (Interview 2, 12th August).*

What can be identified from the excerpts is that Mustafa’s affinity for the national language perhaps created a source of tension in his self-concept in academic writing. Despite external evidence that suggested ability in academic writing was important, Mustafa seemed more resistant to change, and he remained steadfast in his self-evaluation of his writing as *“average”*. This is an interesting finding, as it suggests that when a self-concept has been formed early, it may be less susceptible to change. He explained, *“I think I am still average because of the citation. I still have to follow and open the reference or the AW guidebook to write citation, to do paraphrasing” (Interview 1, 4th August).*

In fact, when asked whether he would describe himself differently in the future, Mustafa initially maintained, *“Still, I would say I am average. I know myself. Even if the lecturer gives me an A, because sometimes I do great work, I will still feel average” (Interview 1, 4th August).* Apparently, there was a juxtaposition between the instructor’s and Mustafa’s self-evaluation. Although he did not elaborate on this, Mustafa’s fixed self-concept in academic writing suggests his preference for stability over change (despite external evidence that suggests otherwise). Regarding whether he foresees change from being *“average”*, Mustafa was quite reluctant to elaborate, but eventually clarified,



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*"Maybe not. Maybe if I become a lecturer and I have been writing longer, maybe I will be good or excellent ... maybe"* (Interview 1, 4th August). This hesitancy seems to suggest Mustafa's attempt to maintain a coherent identity, but also that his self-concept is informed by comparison with others whose English is better than his.

### ***Mustafa's Engagement in the AW class***

Mustafa's engagement in the AW class seemed to be influenced by his immediate and future goals and recognition and acknowledgement of him in the AW classroom. He listed two main goals that he currently has in mind: to be a lecturer and to be a scientist. Mustafa seemed to believe that academic writing did not play the same role in these goals. When asked whether he felt that academic writing was important for his future, Mustafa initially explained, *"No, I don't think academic writing is very important for my future" [as a Scientist]* (Interview 1, 4th August). However, later on he stated, *"I want to be a lecturer and I want to do my Masters. So yes, academic writing is directly involved. That is why I am working hard now to improve myself"* (Interview 2, 12th August). Although not all his goals might necessarily have an immediate connection with academic writing, Mustafa was very aware that both goals could only be achieved through outstanding academic success. He disclosed, *"For this semester I want to raise my CGPA. It is still below 3.00. If I want to further my studies or be a scientist 3 pointer is not enough. I hope this paper [AW] will help"* (Interview 2, 12th August 2014).

Mustafa appreciated that his efforts to become involved in the lesson were recognized by the instructor. He reported that his assessments had consistently received positive feedback and high marks from the instructors, and this in turn made him *"more confident about my writing"* (Interview 2, 12th August). This confidence seems to be linked to his engagement in the class, as he was actively involved in answering questions, giving opinions and becoming involved in discussions and presentations in class. He explained, *"I can remember in one class, I was the only one who answered her [the instructor] and then she asked others why they were not as involved [as me] in the class"* (Interview 2, 12th August). Despite getting recognition for contributions in the class, however, Mustafa did not want to be a "popular" student. He emphasized, *"I don't need to be popular. There is no benefit. Maybe you will make a lot of friends, but nothing more. Learning is more important"* (Interview 2, 12th August).

The quote reveals not only Mustafa's high emphasis on learning, but also his satisfaction about being acknowledged by lecturers for participating in educationally purposeful activities. While, for specific tasks, he exhibited an individual orientation for engagement, at other times he had a more social interaction. In a language class where learners are continuously trying to improve their skills, such as speaking and writing, Mustafa would take risks and put in the effort for more public participation. When asked whether he felt anxious about public speaking, Mustafa admitted that the fear would always be there, but, *"It prepares me."*





*If I keep presenting and with a lot of practice, the confidence will come and I won't be as nervous the next time*" (Interview 2, 12th August). This quote appears to contradict Mustafa's earlier report on how he would remain average (despite getting good grades). This inconsistency suggests that Mustafa's self-concept in academic writing is susceptible to change when he regards some factors as salient (e.g., improvement of skills). It is also likely that his earlier report that he has an average self-concept in academic writing may have been transitory in nature.

### ***The relationship between self-concept in academic writing and engagement***

Mustafa believed that a strong relationship existed between self-concept in academic writing and engagement. Mustafa explained. *"It's a strong relationship. I think self-concept plays a big role in engagement in the class ... especially in academic writing but some other factors are also influencing it"* (Interview 2, 12th August). When asked about what "other factors" consisted of, Mustafa explained that it was, *"Self- confidence ... it's mostly confidence"* (Interview 2, 12th August). Although the intensity of his engagement appeared to be challenged by internal conflicts, Mustafa was able to engage cognitively, behaviorally and affectively in activities that would mediate the process of attaining his goals due to positive (past and present) learning experiences. In particular, having the confidence, skills and resources permitted him to engage and participate in activities successfully in the AW class. He related this to his own experience: *"People who already have the confidence to speak and to write well, always participate in class. During my prerequisite English class, those who are in Band 3, 2 and 1 in MUET don't seem to participate"* (Interview 2, 12th August). It can be inferred that less proficient students are at a disadvantage as participation in the AW class is based on English language abilities. This was further highlighted by the significance of self-efficacy in Mustafa's learning experiences.

Besides self-efficacy, Mustafa's gradual awareness of the utility of English sustained him throughout his academic experience, resulting in positive academic success.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study, the life stages of students (e.g., university students working toward their career development), their English language learning stage and the context in which they were embedded imply there are developmental changes in self-concept in academic writing. For example, the case study revealed glimpses of not only who Mustafa was in the past and present, but also his aspirations for the future as manifested in his reported future self. Mustafa's case epitomized how an individual can adapt to situational demands (e.g., learning academic writing and having to use English as the medium of instruction). It appears that the learners' trajectory of self-concept in academic writing may change in this journey.



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Learners' self-concepts in academic writing essentially capture beliefs in their competence about academic writing abilities in L2. It is probable that the accuracy of this knowledge of the self in the context of academic writing would increase as learners gain more academic experience, during which they are made more aware of and realistic about their competence in a particular domain (as suggested by Harter, 1999). To illustrate, differences were found in some of the students' reported self-concept in academic writing between April (Phase One) and August (Phase Two). Based on the nuances between Phase One and Phase Two responses, it seems that there has been development in learners' self-concept, as they undergo formal and informal socialization in the AW class and the academic context as a whole.

In some cases, students' self-concept in academic writing appears to be quite central. As a result, the interaction of students' self-concept in academic and contextual demands appears to inhibit self-concept in academic writing from being internalized into the personal self. This was evident in Mustafa, whose self-concept in academic writing seemed to be central, but had a negative disposition. To illustrate, Mustafa's self-concept in academic writing was evident in his conflict and resistance to change, *"I know myself. Even if the lecturer gives me an A because sometimes I do great work, I will still feel average"* (Interview 1, 4th August). This implies that instructors are not always influential. Other factors, such as self-efficacy in L2 may override high grades in shaping self-concept in academic writing.

Considering the socio-historical background of Malaysian learners, this finding indicates that the learner has multiple self-concepts in which some are central, and some are peripheral. The students are multilingual and have had more exposure to L1; this alludes to L1 self-concepts as being more central and self-concept in academic writing, as peripheral. For example, when Mustafa was asked whether his present self-concept would improve, he explained, *"Maybe if I become a lecturer and I have been writing longer, maybe I will be good or excellent ... maybe"* (Interview 1, 4th August). This suggests an attempt at maintaining a coherent identity and the stability of his self. His reluctance may also be explained by the fact that when self-concepts as a writer in L2 and self-concept in English have been integrated into the core sense of self, there is a drive for self-preservation (Sedikides, Gaertner, & O'Mara, 2011), making new and contrasting self-concepts less easily assimilated (McConnell, 2011). For some students, development of positive self-concepts in academic writing may be gradual and slow. It is likely that instances in which self-concept in academic writing appear to be marginalized could mean that the process of adapting could be one of conflict. This is consistent with Turner and Onorato (1999) who state that "peripheral concepts of the self that are more fluid allow the individual to adapt to various social situations and adopt various roles and group identities" (pp. 15-16). The findings in this study highlight how, for students such as Mustafa, reconciling stability and change can be marked by conflicts in which the individual has to find a balance between maintaining individuality (*I*) and similarity (*we*) with the other students. If a collective AW identity becomes more dominant, the central self may need to be suppressed if it is in conflict with this particular academic setting.



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Salient internal and external influences appear to be contingent on the social changes that students face as part of the process of moving into a new academic setting. Therefore, it is probable that when learners are placed into a new setting, they have to reflect on, and re-evaluate their abilities, in order to adapt to internal and situational changes. In this new setting, the learners' self-concept may be questioned or reinforced as "part of the active restructuring of the ecology of the self" (Hormuth, 1990, p. 5). The notion of ecology, which underlines the significance of context, emphasizes the dynamic nature of the self as proposed by Hormuth (1990), who maintains that self exists as part of an ecological system that is acquired and developed through social experience. He indicates that the ecology of self includes other people, environments and objects and that: "these elements serve as the sources and setting, instrument and symbols of social experience" (p. 1). This may result in learners "making selective use of new elements that can enhance the existing concept of the self" (p. 5).

Based on the findings from this study, it seems reasonable to posit that the relationship between self-concept in academic writing and engagement in the AW class appears to be influenced by either learner's self-concept in academic writing or engagement. This finding is consistent with the expectancy-value model theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002), whereby students' beliefs about their abilities in academic writing and their likelihood of succeeding could predict their subsequent efforts in the learning context. At the same time, Newmann et al. (1992) articulated that one of the bases of student academic engagement theory is the fundamental human need to develop and express competence. This was evidenced in the findings of this current study, in which some students perceived their engagement as providing feedback and recognition in the AW class. Kuh (2003) explains this by saying "the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing, or problem solving, the more adept they become" (p. 25). Knowledge therefore, in turn, informs students' self-concept.

### CONCLUSION

Changes involving one's sense of self can take time. Mustafa's case study revealed how disruption to self-concept development and the lack of stability can have a detrimental impact on the learner's performance and outlook, when they are learning AW in L2. Hence implementation of policy changes with regard to medium of instruction should be executed within a practical and feasible time frame (Zarina Suriya Ramlan, 2009). Based on the findings of the present study, it is recommended that policymakers: (a) exercise transparency about the position of English and the intended outcomes of any policy changes; (b) provide transition time in order for those involved (institution, instructors and students) to adjust to policy changes; and (c) provide support for instructors and institutions alike through extensive professional development programs to cope with any major curriculum change.



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Learning a new subject such as academic writing in a second language, in a new setting, can be a demanding experience. However, learning AW in L2 does not have to be an isolated process. The study has ascertained that multiple factors could influence self-concept in academic writing and engagement in a positive way. These factors include the quality of student-peer and student-instructor interaction, and the existence of a support network in the form of peers and senior students. The findings suggest that students engage in the AW class not only for gaining academic literacy and academic performance, but also to gain upward mobility (e.g., better job prospects and postgraduate studies). Hence, we need to integrate learners' goals into A W curricula since the congruency of their future selves with current academic context provides an ideal motivation for learning academic writing in L2.

Since self-concept is developmental, future research could be undertaken within a wider range of higher learning institutions, following students over a longer period. The longitudinal emphasis will provide a better understanding of changes to peripheral self- concepts (e.g., whether these are integrated as part of the central or core sense of self or abandoned altogether by students). Additionally, further research would also confirm specific catalysts (both internal and external) that trigger changes in learners' self- concept. More knowledge of the ecology of self-concept in academic writing would also provide more understanding of the possibilities for self-concept change in learners.

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