

## Identity Features in Nigerian Students' Descriptive Writings

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### Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to explore the features of identity found in the context of descriptive essays. This study seeks to identify how students in diaspora often create a dominant impression, theme, and idea while revealing their identity. The samples utilized in this study consists of essays written by Nigerian students pursuing different levels of postgraduate courses in Universiti Utara Malaysia, a public university situated at Kedah, Sintok; a northern state in Malaysia. The participants were international students originating from the three Nigerian major ethnic groups, namely; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The findings of this study indicated that the students tend to relate identity in writing within the society and academic contexts. The findings also showed that the students tend to express their identity in writing cognitively, using linguistic and socio-linguistic features based on their logical knowledge and on their level of awareness in ESL writing.

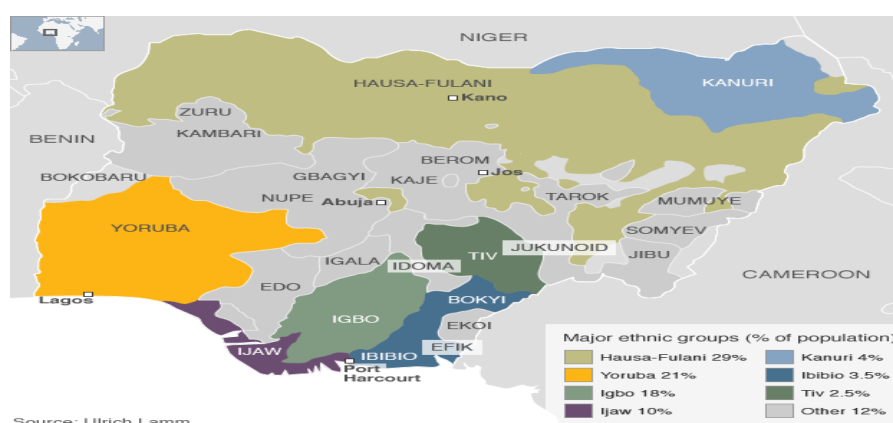
**Keywords:** identity, descriptive essay, ESL writing, gender, ethnic groups

### INTRODUCTION

This study investigates issues related to 'identity' in the content of descriptive essays written by Nigerian international postgraduate students studying in Universiti Utara, Malaysia (UUM). The descriptive essays were written in English as in Nigeria English operates as an L2 for the majority of the citizens. Moreover, English language, playing the role as a second language (ESL) of the nation, manifested in Nigeria since before its amalgamation of the northern, the southern and the eastern protectorates in 1914 (Danladi, 2013). Since then, English writing was taught to students in Nigeria to meet the academic and administrative needs of the nation. In this case, over the years, English is the language of education as well as the official language of administration in the country (Muodumogu & Unwaha, 2013). Practically, English in the Nigerian context, goes along with

other nations around the world (Crystal, 2001); being an integral and a frequently used language nationally as a means of communication, cutting across all major and minor Nigerian ethnicities (Ezenwosu, 2011).

In simple terms, it is worth noting for years, English is taught in Nigeria in order to meet the academic requirement of the nation (Chiluwa; 2008; Ezenwosu, 2011; Fakeye, 2014), to tackle career advancement issues (Edem, Mbaba, Udosen & Isioma, 2011; Muodumogu & Unwaha) and for communication bridging (Danladi, 2013; Faleke & Ibrahim, 2011) in a multilingual nation such as Nigeria, with over 500 ethnic groups (Okoro, 2012). Figure 1 below gives a sketchy picture of the major ethnic groups existing in the country as well as some of the few minority ethnic groups existing in Nigeria, based on regional subdivisions.



**Figure 1.** Map indicating Nigerian ethnic groups (Okoro, 2012, p.47)

In reality, figure 1 above further clarifies and highlights instances of Nigeria as a “multilingual nation consisting of different ethnic groups, which geographically covers about 356, 669 of Western-African square miles with an estimated population of 150 million people” (Danladi, 2013, p. 4). To an extent, figure 1 justifies the agreement among majority of scholars, that 30% of the Nigerian populace is located in the northern region known as Hausa ethnic group, 20% is the Yoruba ethnic group living at the western region, and 18% of the population belongs to the Igbo ethnic group located at the eastern part of Nigeria. The remaining 32% of the population belongs to the minority groups including Angas, Aragon, Bura, Babur, Bokyi, Egon, Ebira, Efik, Fulfulde, Ikwere, Ibibio, Ijo, Ijaw, Idoma, Itsekiri, Jukun, Kambari, Kanuri, Kalabari, Mumuye, Nupe, Tiv, and so on (Danladi, 2013; Okoro, 2012). These percentage ratios makes the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo to be regarded as the three major Nigerian ethnic groups to operate side-by-side with English and as the regional lingua-franca by the Federal Government decree of 1979. Due to this fact, Nigerians are exposed to several discursive practices that relates to identity particularly in ESL situations. Identity features within the context of academic discourse seems to be very crucial among researchers from different ranges and perspectives (Biber & Conrad, 2009; Flowerdew & Leong, 2010; Hyland, 2002; Omoniyi & White, 2006; Jalili & Nosratzadeh, 2015; Nafa, 2015). As such, there has been substantial amount of arguments from various scholars that identity in writing is expressed through languages (Biber & Conrad, 2009; Hyland 2015; Ivanic, 1997), which is not fixed and is dynamic (Omoniyi & White, 2006; Hall & Nilep, 2015),

and it is constructed within established variable contexts defined by social variables (Block, 2006; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015).

Subsequently, in a related study conducted by Hyland (2002), he claims that in the process of English writing learning, undergraduates do “often creates new identity” (Hyland 2002, p. 352). In this view, however, we found, there is crucial need to explore how far these claims will indicate linguistic features of identity in the sample of descriptive essay written by the Nigerian international postgraduate students. Studies have investigated issues of identity in the discourse of Indian epic (Lias, 1999), identity in the discourse of contemporary Japanese film (Iles, 2008), socio-political and cultural identity in the discourse of Hong Kong’s favourite newspaper (Flowerdew & Leong, 2010), as well as a corpus analysis of repeated language patterns by encoding corrective argument styles, attitudes with knowledge, relationships between folks and ideas with identity (Hyland, 2015), descriptive and corpus-based analysis of linguistics constituents (Manvender & Sarimah, 2011), moving to identity matters in schooling discourse (LeCourt, 2004), to exploring Saudi Arabia’s EFL students identity in discourse (Elyas, 2014) and so on.

However, studies are scarce when it comes to examine the linguistic features of identity in descriptive essays particularly among Nigerian international postgraduate students. We found, there is dearth need of research that explores the kind of features duly employed by the Nigerian international students in their ESL writing that symbolises their communicative level in terms of linguistic and sociolinguistic practices within the context of academic environment. And this is the main aim of the present paper. With this, and in aiming to describe and distinguish the ranges of identity in discourse found in the students’ descriptive essays, we situated this paper within theoretical frameworks of ethno-linguistics theoretical approaches.

As the case might be, the real target of this paper is to investigate the kind of identity features found in postgraduate Nigerian students’ descriptive essay writing. In like manner, it is part of its aims to explain the ways in which linguistic features promote identity in postgraduate Nigerian students’ descriptive essay writing. Notwithstanding this, it intends aims to explain the extent socio-linguistic features’ influence on identity in the postgraduate Nigerian students’ descriptive essays. In view of these destinations, this paper attains the ultimatum in order to answer the following formulated questions:

1. What are the types of identity features found in postgraduate Nigerian students’ descriptive essays?
2. How do the linguistic features promote identity in postgraduate Nigerian students’ descriptive essays?
3. To what extent do the socio-linguistic features influence the postgraduate Nigerian students’ descriptive essays?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides brief overview within studies of identity as an artefact of increasing interest among researchers globally. There is no doubt issues relating with

identity has been a major trait of investigation within the scope of academic discourse as a subfield, as seen in such works of Shamsul (1996), Ivanic (1998), Winn and Rubin (2001), Flowerdew (2004), Clingman (2009), Velasquez (2010), Hyland (2010, 2015), etc., making literature on identity well vast and it continues to expand progressively even though it has met with some sort of stiff resistance initially. In an ordinary term, identity typically cultivates and characterised its roots from the field of rhetoric which was institutionalised as a disciplinary field.

Perhaps, in the study of identity, the dominant focal point among researchers have been in the areas of academic identity (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Hyland, 2002, 2012<sup>a</sup>, 2015; Ivanic, 1997, 1998; Matsuda, 2015; Silver, 2012), issues on identity within the domain of sociolinguistics (Don, 2007; Hyland, 2000; Litosselitti & Sunderland, 2002; Omoniyi, 2011; Omoniyi & White, 2006), the process of identity towards learning in ESL/EFL situations (Elyas, 2014; Hyland, 2012<sup>b</sup>; Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund, 2012; LeCourt, 2004; Preece, 2009; Petric, 2010), cultural identity in discourse (Flowerdew & Leong, 2010; Hall & Nilep, 2015; Jackson, 2008), ethno-linguistics identity in discourse (Appiah, 2005; Riley, 2007; Saito, 2002; Vincze, 2013), and many more were found accessible.

In a similar context, the works of Hyland (2002, 2008<sup>a</sup>, 2008<sup>b</sup>, 2010, 2012, 2015) pave way for the study of identity in academic context in which he affirms, it is shared and constructed through social resources for meaning making. In most cases, and crucially, he does basis argument on identity in writing within the model of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). On the other hand, he also relates identity within the genre perspective as discipline which he sees in terms of "centre of population in which they are used and as a function of the choice, along with the constraints acting on the text producers" (Hyland, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, in an effort to provide extensive clarity on identity situation to learners', particularly of ESL/EFL university environments; he stresses that students were habitually built to value academic writing with the idea that it is "dry and impersonal, influencing students to leave their personalities at the door and subordinate their views, actions, and traits to its rigid conventions of anonymity" (Hyland, 2002, p. 351). In addition to this, he further stated that in academic writing, students' often pressed their claims to a "competent academic identity in various areas of research" (Hyland, 2015, p. 8).

Recently, in trying to understand the nature of identity in English writing among the Nigerian international postgraduates, this paper come across researches on identity which were associated to critical discourse analysis (CDA), gender issues, cultural studies, aesthetic, ethno-linguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnographic, etc. For example, Hall and Nilep (2015) build an identity review in a rich tradition and identified features relating with globalisation, code switching, political and economic discourse within the scopes of CDA, sociolinguistics, and ethnography of communication. In their analysis, they suggested four divergent theoretical perspectives within the discursive tradition of identity. Firstly, they situate code switching to have been observed by early scholars as the artefact of speech community's identity within the ranges of ethnography of communication in the 60s and 70s. Secondly, they positioned language and political

economy to have constituted the interest of various researchers in exploring identity within the notion of nation-state or nationalism, side to side with sociolinguistics approaches in the predominantly in the eighties (1980s). Thirdly, a new tradition emerged, which closely, in the 1990s researchers turn their attention into social theories tying identity with discursive practices as well as with multicultural and inter-ethnic linguistic features. And then fourthly, they firmly affirms the situating of analysis on identity into CDA paradigm set the stage for a latest tradition of developing research in identity, that focuses on its hybridity among cultures; which is accelerated by the theory of globalisation.

In addition to this, Koller (2012) employed CDA in identifying collective identity in discourse relating with linguistic and semiotic descriptions of textual features. She argued that textual features relating with socio-cognitive interpretations ascertains linguistic and semiotic features involve in identity includes social actors, modality, metaphoric expressions, intertextuality and the influence of socio-cognitive representation.

Moreover, Matsuda (2015) have invoked identity in the context of writing as a complex phenomenon which involves descriptive and measured construction. He obliquely affirms, students in L2 writing find it difficult to associate issues relating identity from the perspective of voice (Lorés-Sanz, 2011; Petric, 2010; Salger-Meyer, Alcaraz-Ariza & Luzardo, 2012; Stewart, 1972; Tardy, 2012; Thompson, 2012). This is because, to him, voice amalgamates the “role of the reader, the writer and the text which language users create deliberately or otherwise from socially available yet ever-changing range” (p. 145). Somewhat ironically, he is aware of the fact that the issue of voice relating with identity in academic discourse was followed by a strong disagreement among other researchers opposing that the issue of voice was overstated. On the contrary, calling for a shift of emphasis from voice to topics such as ideas and arguments (Stapleton, 2002; Zhao, 2012; Zhao & Llosa, 2008), yet he certainly acknowledges the issue of voice while relating it with identity in writing.

In like manner, Nafa (2015) proposes the approach of stance as an analytic tool that can be utilized in linguistics and in bilingual instructions. She carried out her study within a group sample of six adult Libyan females; they are Arabs in the UK for about six years as sojourner students. She affirms stance emerged on her sampled Arabic learners’ as they employed codeswitching as linguistic practice to indirectly construct and negotiate aspects of their identity.

Prior research of Huhtala and Lehti-Eklund (2012) reported identity to ESL users stand as way of expressing students’ level of linguistic competence within the scope of essay writing. They compared 24 essays written by Finnish university students of Swedish, there by exploring the students’ language learning process as L2 users. They establish that, identity is something flexible, hybrid, multifaceted, and temporal in dimension evolving between the source language and the target language particularly in academic context. Thus, they pointed towards, an underlying assumption that identity within the domain of ethno-linguistics and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) have been

observed by various scholars, citing works by Saito (2002), Rile (2007), and Vincze (2013) to justify their argument. However, for the purpose of this study, we lean our analysis on identity in the students' descriptive essays within the theoretical constructions of ethno-linguistics. In such case, we make use of descriptive essay as research instrument that helps in explaining the kind of linguistic features found in the students' descriptive essays in revealing their identity in writing.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized 30 samples of the descriptive essays written by the Nigerian international postgraduate students' studying in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). In terms of analysis, this article is qualitative in nature, employing extracts, glosses, and isoglosses in justifying its findings (Creswell 2014). This allowed us to systematically extract the textual information as well as the symbolic contents (Dörnyei, 2011) found relating to identity within the students' descriptive essays. In the course of accessing the participants for this study, we employed convenience sampling technique (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The study was carried out between October 2014 and July 2015.

The participants were grouped in one class and were asked to describe UUM relating it to life in diaspora within 450 to 500 words and within the limited timing of an hour thirty minutes (1hour, 30 minutes). In the broadest terms, 15 male and 15 female postgraduate students originating from the major Nigerian ethnic groups participated. To elaborate more, 10 students from Hausa, plus 10 from Igbo, added up with 10 students from Yoruba ethnic groups voluntarily partake to make up its 30 participants.

In the same vein, the sampled students firmly originate within the geographical zones of Western-Africa and from different linguistic phylum. The Hausa emanated from the Afro-Asiatic of the Chadic family, and then both Igbo and Yoruba were from the Niger-Congo of Niger-Kordofanian linguistic family. Thus, the sample representatives in this study originate from a multilingual setting instigating from the three major ethnic groups; studying in a similar atmosphere of their origin, i.e. Malaysia, a multilingual nation with three major races; Malays, Indians and Chinese (Shamsul, 1996).

To sum up, we tied this paper on the theoretical bases of ethno-linguistic, this is because, approaches of the paper are heavily linked with identity; mostly within linguistic diversity; register variation; cultural distinctiveness; discursive, linguistic, strategic and communicative competences; ethnic-linguistic vitality; as well as within social and academic situations (Clingman, 2009; Duranti, 1997; Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1964). Despite considerable approaches, we united the analysis of this paper on identity, relating it with ethno-linguistic paradigm in exploring the Nigerian international postgraduates' descriptive essays originating from three different linguistic groups of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba studying at Universiti Utara; a public university in Malaysia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In reality, descriptive essays refer to a type of subjective test usually administered to learners in order to assess their highest-degree in writing (Muhammad & Subadrah, 2015; Manvender & Sarimah, 2011, 2010). Coupled with the fact, in most cases, descriptive essay writing symbolises a formation text in the form of a report, picture, explanation, and the description, pertaining to place, object, person or experience relating to cognitive factors. Therefore, going by its first objective and question, in this paper, we found, through the medium of descriptive essay, the students do reveals identity in writing, relating it to the society, and to the academic environment, as well as to the social category they found themselves in. At the same time, in this paper, our findings support the opinion of various scholars that instances of identity are very often seen as an instrumental agency in the description made by the students' (Appiah, 2005; Block, 2006; Elyas, 2014; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; LeCourt, 2004) which mirrors and as well influence the use of linguistic and sociolinguistic features.

In this section, we described identity as to have played a central role in the students' writing, being members of an academic discourse community. And this can be related with the argument of Flowerdew and Wang (2015) that students in academic discourse "reveals their competency in constructing identity in their essays for examinations in order to move on to the next stage of their academic careers" (p. 82). In this situation, we found that identity significantly influence the students' writing with attributes to linguistic and sociolinguistic features in the form of:

- a) Linguistic borrowing
- b) Use of acronyms
- c) Gender related issues
- d) Cultural related issues
- e) Religious related issues
- f) Ethnic related issues
- g) Immigration

The second objective and question of this paper is devoted to explaining how often the identified linguistic features promote the student's identity in English writing. In responding to this motive, borrowing is one of the key linguistic features identified. The term borrowing, also known as loanwords, is mostly employed by "comparative and historical linguists to refer to a linguistic constituent employed in one language or dialect to another" (Crystal, 2008, p. 58). Here, linguistic borrowing provides the essays with cognitive thoughts and exposure in describing as well as in controlling their ideas (Chamo, 2011; Hymes, 1982; Llamas, 2006). This in turn, reflects their societal world of view which signifies their level of vocabulary in use, which in turn, provides them with catalogue of terminologies. To an extent, the students profoundly borrowed from Bahasa Malaysian vocabularies and lexical categories while structuring ideas to describe their university. They borrowed from the names of places, things, persons, etc., with inflectional morphological derivatives of a different semantic system. In this study, occurrences of the use of linguistic borrowing in the students' essays include:

..... Because of my curiosity I started learning Bahasa Melayu with my jotter. I learned words like "makan", "kiri", "sayeepargikedah", etc. The first mistake that I made was in picking a bus that does not come to UUM. I was dropped at the Shehab Perdana bus terminal at AlorSetar. The moment I was dropped, taxi man approached me and enquired where I was heading to. I replied UUM. He said RM 50 (Respondent 1).

..... The most prominent building in the campus is the Bendahari, the Chancellori, International VISA Office, Clinic, Sports Centre and other services are obtainable (Respondent 3).

..... The friendliness of the university is registered on the bill board with 'Salamat Datang' as you come in to the entrance of the university main gate (Respondent 6).

Therefore, notably from the essays, the students manifest their cognitive situation by borrowing heavily from Malay language to enrich their vocabulary in the ESL writing. In their essay write up, the students' embedded elements of Malay language that have been integrated into their daily communicative events and this signify their high level in linguistic and communicative competency in ESL writing as an academic practice. This testify the arguments of scholars that borrowing is simply such a "cultural and linguistic phenomena where the adoption of individual words or even large sets of vocabulary items from another language, register or dialect make a statement about his or her own self-perception" (Amaka, 2012, p. 119). The linguistics borrowing utilized by the students from the sampled essays could be further itemised and defined as:

#### **Borrowed Features    Gloss**

AlorSetar	Name of state capital of Kedah, Malaysia Alor means 'small stream' and Ster means 'plum mango'
Bahasa	Meaning 'language'
Bahasa Melayu	Meaning 'Malaysian language'; A family of western Malayo-Polynesian languages'
Bendahari	Meaning 'bursary' or 'treasury'
Chancellori	Meaning 'chancellor' or rather 'chancellor's office'
Changlun	Name of district existing in AlorSetar
C-Mart	A shopping mall
DPP Maybank	International students residential halls
DPP Proton Café	Meaning 'cafeteria'
Dr. Husna bt. Johari	Malay proper names
Dr. Tan Fee Yean	Chinese proper names
Jalan	Meaning 'road or walk'
Jalan-Jalan	Meaning 'go for walk'
Kedah	Name of a state at northern Malaysia
Kerja-kan	Meaning 'do something'
Kiri	Meaning 'left'
Kuala-Lumpur	The Malaysian National Capital Territory
Main Surau	Sultan Badlishah UUM central Mosque
Makan	Meaning 'eat' or 'food'



Matahari	Meaning 'sun'
Pasar malam	Meaning 'night-market'
Puduraya	An area or site at Kuala-Lumpur
Pusat	Meaning 'centre'
RM 50	Meaning 'fifty ringgits'
Saheb Perdana	Meaning 'prime minister'
Salamat datang	Meaning 'you are welcome' or 'welcome'
Sayeepargikedah	Meaning 'go to Kedah'
Sintok	A small town in Kedah, Malaysian Northern Province
Surau	Meaning 'Mosque'

As it happened, another crucial linguistic feature found in the students' descriptive essays is the frequent use of acronyms which are specific to the university's heritage. In reality, the essays showed a series of acronyms in the form of word abbreviation, phrase abbreviation, and lexical abbreviations through linguistic constructs within the distinction of academic contexts. An acronym symbolise part of word-formation in the form of clipping for contextual clarification and easy identification. Thus, the use of acronyms is a common practice in an academic context at instances where the names of universities, faculties, departments, learning centres, libraries, etc., are abbreviated. Thus, acronyms in linguistics have been:

Part of the study of word-formation in which clipped forms or clippings are formed by reduction of longer word forms are shortened in order to be pronounced in a single word formation. It involves using initialisms or aphabetisms by removing first alphabets of words or end of the words or by blending combine parts of two or more words (Crystal, 2008, p. 1).

For all intent and purposes, the use of acronyms in linguistics enhances acquisition of new vocabularies, also new patterns of language use are learnt, and new ways of formulating requests are also learned, as well as new patterns of address and then semantic extension of meanings are also generated particularly on acronyms produce with idiomatic expressions which are unique within the academic contextual domain (LeCourt, 2004; Morrish, 2002). Furthermore, acronyms in students' writing can be regarded as a kind of word formation via coded shorthand which is pronounced in the form of word to extend certain meaning. Instances where this can be found the students' essays include:

*..... This year I am planning to start a lesson to study Bahasa which is offered at the UUM University Language Centre. I think that I can make such effort because I got incentive to study Bahasa from meeting with my Malay friends (Respondent 15).*

*..... There are lots of nights tutoring classes exposing students to research approaches. Mostly, senior colleagues usually offer lessons on software analysis particularly SPSS and PLS in order to facilitate our research and keep to keep in touch (Respondent 16).*

..... Colleges including AHSGS, COB, COLGIS, and so on, use state-of-the-art facilities that are conversant in learning purpose. UUM management do not recognise much of students' political organisations or students' unionism except the International Students Union (IS) (Respondent 17).

..... But after reviewing the curriculum of School of Education and Modern Languages (SEML) that is under the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) I opted for programme in applied linguistics. I have keen interest on language analysis such as genre analysis, language acquisition, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), corpus analysis, discourses analysis and issues concerning gender (Respondent 19).

Crucially, the use of acronyms highlights the students' pragmatic awareness in terms of creativity in ESL writing within the justification of academic contexts. The students' structured their use of acronyms in the ESL writing in the process of logistics and or mapping ideas within the setting of academic discourse. For instance, when describing locations, or in describing certain buildings with peculiar attributes. In this approach, the use of acronyms in the essays can be listed as following:

<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
AHSGS	Awang Had Salleh Graduate College of Arts and Science
CIAC	Centre for International Affairs and Cooperation
COB	College of Business
COLGIS	College of Law, Government and International Studies
EDC-UUM	Education Learning Centre
ICT	Information Communication Technology
KL	Kuala Lumpur
MSc	Master of Science Degree
RM	Malaysian Ringgit (Currency)
SEML	School of Education and Modern Languages
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
UUM LIB	Sultanah Bahiya UUM Main Library
UUM	University Utara, Malaysia
UUMF1	University Utara Formula One Racing Circuit
VWR	VISA with Reference

The third objective and question intended to be answered in this paper relates to the extent to which the identified socio-linguistic features do influence the students' identity in English writing. For practical applications in academic writing, socio-linguistic features inherently recognise social practice for effective communication. The major goals of socio-linguistic features in ESL writing, is to facilitate the acquisition of rhetorical skills of literacy aspects and communicative strategies for learners to successfully integrate their knowledge (Jackson, 2008; Matsuda, 2001; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007). This is for the reason, in the scenario of writing, socio-linguistic thoughts provides learners with rhetorical influence resulting to effective communication and vivid organizational goal. In reality, we have located places where academic goal

influence the students' writing to reveal their identity based on socio-linguistic features relating to ethnicity, gender, migration and then religion. Hence, we found, the students' revealed, not only communicative practices; relating only to linguistic features are found therein, but rather, features attributed to cultural backgrounds ranging within the bases of socio-cultural factors which contribute heavily to the variation in motivation and at times to their difference in academic achievement.

Specifically, we also discovered at the introductory part of the students' essays, they try to bring about their linguistic background which relates their writing to societal memberships (Saito, 2002; Spotti, 2006; Win & Rubin, 2001). This goes along with Ivanic's (1997) point of view; who claims writers often conveys cognitive attributes or capacities which controls over personal and cultural identity in writing. Closely, from the sampled essays we come to realise, the students' commonly and mutually construct identity on the basis of socialization. In an effort to describe their social reality, examples of excerpts from the students' essays include:

*..... UUM as a global university has students of an overtly diversified academic community within its jungle of various nationalities from Nigeria- where I come from, I have friends that comes from Ethiopia, Somalia, Jordan, Iran, Saudi-Arabia and Sri-Lanka (Respondent 17).*

*..... I was very excited because I had never been on a plane before and I was looking forward to taking a break at the Cairo International Airport as well as to have a glance of the city. I left my home early and I made sure I had some articles to read as I took off from my house to Abuja International Airport due to traffic (Respondent 7).*

From the essays analysed, students were found to be using the following vocabulary in order to construct identity based on socialization:

<b>Vocabulary</b>	<b>Elucidation</b>
Abuja	Federal capital of Nigeria; existing at the North-Central part
Anjali	An Indian proper name meaning 'luck'
Cairo	Federal capital of Egypt; a transcontinental country existing at Corner of North-Eastern Africa to South-Eastern Asian Corner
Chioma	An Igbo proper name
Ethiopia	A country existing at the North and North-East horn of Africa
Iran	Known as Persia; a country existing at the Western Asian continent
Indonesia	A sovereign island country in Southeast Asia and Oceania
Jordan	An Arab Kingdom existing at the Western Asian continent
Nigeria	A country existing at the Western Africa
Pakistan	A country in South-Asia, which is bordered by India to the east
Saudi-Arabia	An Arabian peninsula existing at the Western Asian continent
Somalia	A country located at the horn of African continent
Sri Lanka	An island country existing at the south Asian continent
Thailand	A country at the border with Malaysia, which is immediate from Sintok, where UUM is located at Kedah state

In addition to this, based on socio-linguistic features, again, we found, in the introductory part of the students' essays it contain description of certain situation

where few of the female participants reveal their identity based on gender categorization expressively (Lazar, 2002; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). Issues relating with in identity have derived attention of various researchers including Amaka (2012) citing "Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) and Butler (1990) that argues there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its result" (p. 122). In addition to this, in this paper, we also go by the argument of Trudgill (1974) who propose, expressively, that men under-report use of standard form, whereas, women do over-report use of standard forms. These arguments were found to prevail in the students' ESL writing because gender roles actualised particularly in the introductory part of the students' ESL writing. Primarily, the linguistic codes some of the students' employed in the ESL writing shows their subjective and objective motivations in academic context in their use of language. Thus, the extract of places where such occurs is as follows:

*..... I thought that university life would offer me a free life; from family issues, few restriction of widow life and free threat of administrative work. I was eager to make new friends because I came without my family to avoid the saying "loneliness is sickness". I left three of my children with my grandmother. My husband passes away six years ago and that serve the starting point of my working career (Respondent 12).*

*.... Life in UUM is something to remember because it was not very easy for me as lady. I left my husband and came to UUM with five months pregnancy (Respondent 30).*

Mostly, in their conclusive part, the students reveal their opinions concerning the university, as well the Malaysian citizens at large. Here, the essays provide instances where the students describe their individual identity in response to religious attributes. Religion has been one of the prominent features sociolinguistics (Chiluwa, 2008; Gumperz, 1982; Lias, 1999). Thus, identity this practices accounts for a number of statements regulated by religious ideologies and institutional practices (Omoniyi, 2006). Here, we cite example from the extracts of the students' essays at these instances:

*..... The people are friendly and always smiling. The Malays are good but they are quite and timid. The important aspect is that Malaysia is a Muslim country and people have good cultures. What a relief (Respondent 2).*

*..... Interestingly, my room is nearer to the mosque, so I usually know the actual time for prayer without referring to my watch (Respondent 11).*

Another crucial socio-linguistic feature we found existing in the students' essays is migration. The students revealed their obstacles in the adaptation to the university environment as immigrants (Iyer, 2013; Jackson, 2008; Petric, 2010). The crucial facilitating this is due to the multilingual nature of Malaysia. In view of this, different linguistic setting proves to be difficult to the majority of the students' which clearly

creates a situation of language barrier. Thus, they have to intermediate to English in order to communicate comprehensively. Few of the students' have this to share with us:

*..... In that see of thoughts, I heard a young girl nearby calling UUM. I courageously moved closer to her seat. I asked her whether she is UUM student. She replied yes. Fortunately and unfortunately for me she is an Indonesian and speak little English. The student wanted to help me but language barrier hinders our communication (Respondent 1).*

*..... First and foremost, the distance from Nigeria to Malaysia is about eighteen hours of flight, which is highly tedious and discouraging. More so, another discouraging factor is that of language barrier; only few of them understand English and that makes communication between us (Nigerian international students) and the Malaysian people very difficult (Respondent 8).*

*..... The people (Malays) are good, but, they are too difficult to relate with; they are shy especially their females, problem of language barrier, they are too secluded and everything (notices and information) are written in Malay hence you find it difficult to understand some of their context (Respondent 24).*

From these excerpts, the essays revealed that the students' encounter many obstacles in their adaptation to a new country and to the university, as postgraduate students. Possibly, according to Flowerdew and Wang (2015), if identity in discourse is not fixed by the entity as argued by various scholars, it is for the reason that "it is discursively and dynamically constructed by writers with different linguistic resources" (p. 84).

In addition, it also involves the issues within the domain of communicative competence and the situation during communicative events which often involves not only knowing the linguistic codes in particular situations, but rather knowing the functions of the codes, particularly in cross-cultural and contextual situations (Androutsopoulos & Georgeakopoulos, 2003; Burbano-Elizondo, 2006; Ivanic, 1997; Iyer, 2013; Jalali, 2013; Lorés-Sanz, 2011; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007). This is also regarded as a marker of indices that affects students' cognitive skills in the process of learning.

## CONCLUSION

In view of the findings of this study, it is clear that identity actually set the bar towards the use of linguistic features in English language writing. The descriptive essays written by the Nigerian students show their creativity and competency in using English language, symbolising the role of identity in academic discourse.

Moreover, the findings of this study show the kind of discursive parameters employed by the students in the essay writing, which determine and express their identity based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender in the context of academic goals they wanted to accomplish. In addition, the analysis has shown that the use of language borrowing, and the use of acronyms creates effective environment for the students to express identity in English language writing.

By implications, students need to be exposed more and more on writing descriptive essays due to its significant and strategic process of enhancing English language writing competence. Based on the evidence presented, the findings of this paper provide not only a better perspective of the role descriptive essays take particularly in the linguistic construction of identity but also provides a better understanding of the students' socio-linguistic practices.

This study contributed in revealing, some of the students', limited socio-cultural support attributed to their low proficiency in academic achievement. Particularly, the essays symbolise the students' testimony on factor relating to the potential cultural collision of customs and values erecting barriers to their successful academic pursuits.

In essence, we recommend, special attention should be provided by the Nigerian ministries of education, education policy makers, and the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba (NINLAN), towards standardization of descriptive essay writing activities among students, in order to enhance learners' English language writing skill as an L2 learning activity.

In addition, the Nigerian universities and colleges governing bodies, including the Vice-Chancellors, the Rectors and Provosts of polytechnics and colleges of education respectively, should urge their institutions towards assessing learners competence with the aid of descriptive essays. Furthermore, the national, private and international organisations which include UNICEF, SUBEB, UBE, NERDC, etc., should create policies that will promote and highlight strategies to enhance students' writing in English language through the use of descriptive essays.

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