

The reluctant writer: identity, emotion and episodic resistance in adult migrant literacy

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Journal for
Multicultural
Education

Received 22 December 2025
Revised 2 May 2026
Accepted 22 May 2026

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how writing resistance can emerge in adult migrant language classrooms and how such moments may be misinterpreted when affective and identity dimensions are overlooked. This study responds to limited attention to negative affective experiences among adult migrant learners in vocational and settlement contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts an interpretive qualitative critical incident case approach. Drawing on prolonged engagement over six months, this paper analyzes a critical classroom incident involving a mature-age migrant learner in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program. Data consist of two naturally occurring traces: a contemporaneous teacher journal entry and a learner-produced writing artifact, examined through a teacher-researcher lens.

Findings – The analysis suggests that the learner's resistance to writing is not necessarily linked to demotivation or language proficiency; instead, it acts as an affective and identity-protective strategy in response to a perceived face threat from a reflective writing task. The case highlights the interplay of affective history, professional identity, occupational literacy history and future-oriented pressure on writing engagement.

Originality/value – This paper offers a fine-grained, classroom-based account of writing resistance in adult migrant education and proposes a multi-domain conceptual model integrating affect, identity and investment. This study contributes to broader contextualization in language writing research and has relevance for multicultural education by offering insight into how visibility, voice and belonging may become affectively charged in host-country literacy classrooms serving culturally and professionally diverse adult migrants.

Keywords Adult migrant education, Adult literacy, Writing resistance, Multicultural education, Reflective writing, Affect, Learner identity, Second language writing, Vocational education, Language anxiety

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While positive psychological constructs and traits of successful learners such as grit, motivation or resilience have come into increasing focus in second language acquisition research and application (Dörnyei, 2009; Duckworth *et al.*, 2007), negative emotions and states such as anxiety, reluctance, avoidance or frustration have arguably received less attention. This is especially so for learners in adult and vocational education contexts such as the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) on which this study draws. Most of the research on students' negative affective experience has concentrated on younger learners



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Journal for Multicultural
Education
Emerald Publishing Limited
2053-535X
DOI 10.1108/JME-12-2025-0323

in schools, colleges or universities (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 2017). What remains relatively underexplored is the experience of mature-age students in vocational education and training who have arrived in the country recently and are under time pressure to not only learn the language but also learn it well enough to pass high-stakes English tests like IELTS or PTE to access university study, requalification and careers. The intersections of affect, identity and resistance in these educational settings have been severely underexamined.

Consequently, little is known about how and why moments of writing resistance arise in adult migrant classrooms, especially among learners who are otherwise highly motivated and deeply invested in learning English for work and education futures. In vocational and settlement contexts, reflective writing tasks may have increased affective and identity stakes, but there are few classroom-based accounts of how such tasks can lead to affective rupture and withdrawal. This lack of fine-grained, contextualized analysis makes it challenging for researchers and teachers to read writing resistance beyond deficit-oriented understandings such as low motivation or confidence.

This paper presents an interpretive qualitative critical incident case of Maria (pseudonym), a mature-age migrant woman in the Australian AMEP, whose experience can be read as exemplifying these identity–emotion–literacy entanglements. For six months, I was Maria’s teacher and we met in five-hour classes three times a week. Prolonged contact and observation during informal conversations at breaks and meals enabled me to chronicle her learning progress, preferences and reactions to literacy demands of the classroom. This paper briefly reviews scholarship on the topic, describes a critical incident and a learner artifact and ends with a conceptual model.

This paper aims to examine how writing resistance emerges in adult migrant classrooms as an affective and identity-mediated phenomenon.

It addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How can a moment of writing resistance in an adult migrant classroom be interpreted beyond deficit-oriented explanations?
- RQ2. What roles do affect, identity and literacy history play in shaping such resistance?
- RQ3. How can a critical incident inform a conceptual understanding of writing resistance in adult migrant education?

Theoretical framework

This study draws on an integrated theoretical framework that brings together perspectives on face, identity, investment and affect to interpret writing resistance in adult migrant classrooms as a socially and emotionally situated phenomenon. Emotions in language learning have been widely conceptualized as not merely individual psychological states but also socially and relationally situated phenomena. Scholarship in critical applied linguistics and affect (Benesch, 2017; Pavlenko, 2005; Norton, 2013; Dirkx, 2006) has shown that emotions can serve as indicators of learners’ negotiation of identity, belonging and agency in the classroom. For newly arrived migrants, affective responses such as shame, avoidance or frustration may reflect tensions between prior professional identities and their positioning as “beginners” within new linguistic and social hierarchies (Blackledge and Creese, 2010). From this perspective, affect and identity are central to understanding resistance, particularly in contexts where reflective writing requires learners to make vulnerable aspects of the self-visible.

Goffman’s (1955) work on face can be understood as describing the motivation for individuals to protect a valued sense of self when engaged in interaction. Face represents the

positive social value one person claims for themselves, and as interactional situations put that self-image at risk, individuals enact a variety of face-protective behaviors, including avoidance, withdrawal or resistance. Student motivation to participate or perform publicly in classroom contexts may, therefore, be challenged when there is felt potential for loss of face. In classroom settings, particularly those involving public performance such as writing, the risk of losing face may be heightened for adult learners who bring established professional identities into new learning environments.

Norton's (2013) concept of investment extends traditional understandings of motivation by linking language learning to learners' imagined identities and future trajectories. From this perspective, learners invest in language learning and use it if they feel those practices will help them become members of valued social, professional or interpersonal groups. In migrant education contexts, investment in language learning can be extremely salient because of its connection with employment, requalification and social integration. However, high levels of investment may also intensify vulnerability, as poor performance threatens future-oriented aspects of learners' identities.

Affect, in this study, is understood as socially mediated and relational rather than purely individual. Drawing on Benesch (2017) and Zembylas (2014), emotions can be understood as circulating through classroom contexts constituted by relations of power, positioning of identities and personal histories. From this perspective, feelings of anxiety, frustration or avoidance may be understood as responses to learners' perceived positioning and judgement within classroom interaction. Resistance may, therefore, be framed not as disengagement but as an affective and socially conditioned response to perceived threat.

Dirkx's (2006) conceptualization of emotion and adult learning further illustrates emotion's deep connection to learning in contexts where students are required to learn new things about themselves or make meaning of challenging experiences. Emotions might reveal an adult learner's difficulty negotiating learning with elements of existing identity, specifically in contexts where learning is expected to happen publicly, vulnerably or through modification of the learner's self. Resistance or ruptures may arise when learners feel disequilibrium, tension or conflict. Thus, instances where learners resist or disrupt should not necessarily be viewed as learners failing or refusing to learn, but rather as places where identity, experience and learning collide.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a lens for interpreting writing resistance as an affective reaction tied to identity and negotiated through interactional circumstances, past experiences and future expectations instead of lack of motivation or inability to write. This integrated perspective underpins the analysis that follows and informs the conceptual model developed in this study.

Literature review

In adult and vocational education and training contexts, emotional and behavioral reactions such as resistance or withdrawal may be pathologized as "motivation issues" or low confidence, rather than understood as meaningful, affective acts. Previous research in adult migrant education highlights that negative affective experiences are often linked to identity negotiation, classroom participation and the social visibility of language learning (Dryden *et al.*, 2021; Smith, 2023).

Recent adult-migrant research shows that negative affect in classroom literacy is often shaped by the high-exposure nature of participation. Adult migrants frequently experience anxiety, embarrassment and withdrawal when they must perform "beginnerhood" publicly, especially in host-country classrooms where competence is continuously visible and evaluated (Dryden *et al.*, 2021; Smith, 2023). In Australian migrant classrooms, for example,

foreign language anxiety is reported as embodied distress, silence and avoidance in interaction and is closely tied to learners' sense of legitimacy and belonging (Dryden *et al.*, 2021). These findings support the view that resistance and rupture in adult migrant settings can function as protective responses to identity and face threat rather than as evidence of low motivation.

L2 writing research has only recently begun to address adult immigrant learners in settlement and vocational programs, noting that university-based sampling has limited what we know about adult migrant writing development under real-world pressures (Agebjörn and Walldén, 2025). A substantial proportion of second language acquisition research has historically focused on learners in formal educational settings such as universities, often with relatively high levels of prior literacy. At the same time, research on learners with limited or interrupted formal education has expanded significantly in recent decades (Bigelow and Tarone, 2004; Tarone *et al.*, 2009), although it remains less represented in L2 writing scholarship. In this context, Agebjörn and Walldén (2025) argued much of what we know about second-language (L2) research, including L2 writing research, comes from studies recruiting "learners with relatively long education, typically recruited at colleges or universities" (p. 1). They further stated that this "sampling bias... has negative consequences not only for the development of generalizable L2 theories but also for the applicability of research findings in heterogeneous L2 classrooms" (p. 2). Their study positions adult migrant writing development as a contextually situated process shaped by settlement conditions, educational histories and uneven access to academic literacies. To address this knowledge gap, the present study focuses on an adult migrant learner who was learning English in a vocational context.

Autobiographical and reflective writing is a common pedagogical practice in adult migrant language programs to build voice and meaning-making, but scholarship also shows that it can be a high-exposure genre for learners with complex educational or life experiences. Life-writing and identity-driven autobiographical instruction can be pedagogically powerful, but personal prompts also constitute "risky writing" because they may invite emotional exposure, self-disclosure and fear of judgement or face loss in public classroom spaces (Berman, 2001). Trauma-informed English as a Second Language (ESL) scholarship also notes that reflective tasks can re-traumatize shame or painful memory, and that positive participation in such tasks depends on emotional safety, learner choice and the right to withhold (Dryden *et al.*, 2021; PolicyBristol, 2024). This helps explain why reflective prompts may trigger sudden resistance even among otherwise capable and invested adult learners.

Pettitt *et al.* (2021) similarly observed that "although the field of second language writing (SLW) has offered decades of critical research... leading L2 writing scholars have called for increased diversity in the scope and reach of SLW scholarship" and called for "the field of L2 writing to broaden the variety of contexts, learners, languages, and issues with which it engages" (p. 1). They argued that "general theories of L2 writing development must include a broader spectrum of learners in the world globally." Adult L2 learners with emergent literacy enter classrooms with challenges that differ significantly from those of children or L2 learners studying in colleges or universities. Pettitt *et al.* (2021) also noted that "these refugee or immigrant learners may suffer from undiagnosed trauma due to the economic, social, and political hardships faced prior to or during migration, all of which may have an effect on their present learning, including their L2 writing" (pp. 2–3). This call has been echoed in recent affect-focused syntheses of adult migrant literacy, which emphasize that writing engagement is inseparable from emotional histories and identity stakes in settlement classrooms (Toscano-Fuentes *et al.*, 2024).

Resistance has been explored in language classrooms within critical applied linguistics literature as purposeful push back against power dynamics, identity positioning and pedagogical norms rather than apathy or refusal to learn (Canagarajah, 1993; Benesch, 2001; Toohey, 2000). Informed by this work, refusal, silence or withdrawal may be interpreted as expressions of agency, identity negotiation or resistance to assigned learner positions. This literature supports interpreting classroom resistance as socially and affectively situated rather than as an individual deficit.

In addition to affective and identity pressures, adult migrants' writing engagement is shaped by occupational and literacy histories. In some contexts, including the Australian AMEP, adult migrants may enter settlement or vocational classrooms with substantial workplace literacy experience, but those literacies may be highly scripted, compliance-driven or task-specific. Research on vocational and workplace-aligned migrant ESL shows that classroom genres do not always align with learners' prior occupational literacies and that such mismatches can generate confusion, reluctance or disengagement that are not reducible to language level alone (Mansuripur-Vafai, 2016; Walldén, 2024). When programs shift from workplace-functional literacies toward unscripted, reflective writing, learners may experience the task as a threat to competence and professional identity, which can intensify affective resistance (Mansuripur-Vafai, 2016).

Finally, adult migrant writing is often oriented toward high-stakes futures. Learners in settlement and vocational programs work under time pressure to achieve English proficiency for requalification, employment and credentialing and high-stakes tests can act as gatekeeping mechanisms that fuel anxiety and sense of consequences of failure (Séguis *et al.*, 2024; Knoch *et al.*, 2021; Yao and Wallace, 2021). In this way, future orientation can not only fuel investment and persistence but also create fear of failure and perfectionistic standards. As a result, classroom writing tasks may carry disproportionate identity stakes, as weak performance in the classroom is experienced as not only a language problem but also a threat to professional and migratory goals.

Taken together, this scholarship suggests that adult migrant reflective writing resistance can emerge where affective history, identity and face concerns, occupational literacy histories and future-oriented pressure intersect. The present study examines one such rupture in close detail and uses it to develop the multi-domain model proposed in Figure 1. The Methodology section that follows outlines the interpretive single-case, critical-incident design and the two traces from the lesson, my contemporaneous teacher-journal entry and Maria's post-incident writing and explains how these were analyzed abductively through an iterative back-and-forth between the traces and relevant theories on face and identity, investment and affect in adult learning.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative critical incident case approach of one adult migrant learner, "Maria" (pseudonym), in an AMEP class within a vocational preparation context, analyzed through a reflective practitioner (teacher-researcher) lens. While the analysis centers on a single classroom event, it is grounded in prolonged engagement with the participant over an extended period. Consistent with qualitative case-oriented research, it attempts to generate thick, contextually bound understanding as opposed to statistical generalization (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018).

It centers on a critical classroom incident that occurred during a scaffolded reflective writing activity on adversity. Drawing on critical incident methodology, the episode is treated as an analytically significant moment that discloses how emotion and identity impact



Figure 1. A multi-domain conceptual model of reflective writing resistance in adult migrant education
Source(s): Author’s own work

learners’ writing practices. Critical incident research focuses on events that reveal underlying tensions, assumptions or processes within practice rather than on their frequency or scale (Tripp, 1993; Farrell, 2008).

While the analysis focuses on this single episode, it is embedded within approximately six months of sustained classroom engagement at the time of data generation, comprising roughly 15 h of weekly contact (three days per week, five hours per day), amounting to an estimated 350–400 h of interaction with the participant. Prolonged engagement is a key criterion for qualitative rigor, enhancing credibility by enabling the researcher to distinguish typical from atypical behavior and to interpret events within a well-established relational and contextual history (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Context

At the time of writing this paper, Maria had been studying with me three times a week for approximately five hours per day over a six-month period. This long-term, high-contact teaching relationship means that the critical incident described in this paper was not experienced in isolation, but rather contrasted with a well-formed baseline of Maria’s everyday classroom identity and participation. During that time, I was able to notice her literacy practices, how she liked to approach literacy activities and her emotional reactions during her day-to-day classroom activities. The longer and close contact also enabled informal talk during break times, lunch and after-class. These conversations gave me more insights into her motivations, professional identity and her investment into learning English.

This prolonged engagement is significant for two reasons. First, it supports the credibility of the case by grounding the interpretation of the rupture in a sustained history rather than a single lesson impression. The incident could be recognized as unusual precisely because it contrasted so sharply with Maria’s established disposition as confident, socially warm, highly motivated and persistent in the face of challenge. Second, prolonged engagement provides contextual depth for understanding how reflective writing demands interacted with

her broader learning trajectory, including her strong investment in English as a pathway to professional re-entry. The longer relationship, therefore, functions as a methodological resource, enabling the incident and its aftermath to be interpreted as part of a lived classroom and identity history rather than as an isolated affective outburst.

Participant background

Maria's case was somewhat atypical within the AMEP cohort because she migrated independently in later adulthood and brought an extensive professional and workplace literacy history into the classroom. Maria migrated to Australia in her fifties on her own through a humanitarian pathway and held a diploma in engineering completed in her first language. She had learnt English as a school subject only and had never used the language for extended communication or writing. In her previous role as a border control officer, her workplace literacy practices had been restricted to form-filling, checking clients' documentation and ticking boxes to indicate that she had done so. This type of literacy work required minimal productive English use, but allowed her to feel secure and competent in her abilities. As Maria took great pride in explaining, she was considered one of the few in her workplace who could "use English."

The shift from scripted, compliance-focused, checkbox form-filling to unscripted, expressive, meaningful writing for communicative and academic purposes upon entry to the Australian classroom, therefore, entailed a dramatic transition for Maria. The move from rehearsed administrative literacy to learning to write in English in the classroom, in other words, was also a shift between established and emergent aspects of her professional identity. It was against this background of tension between a sedimented identity as a competent professional and an emerging, in-process identity as a language learner, that the incident that I describe below unfolded.

Data sources

The account draws on naturally occurring classroom materials:

- Teacher journal notes were written straight after lessons as part of my regular reflective practice. Immediately following the incident, I recorded a detailed narrative in a teacher's journal as part of routine reflective practice. The entry documents the task prompt, the interactional sequence, the learner's embodied and verbal responses and key utterances as closely as recall allowed. Because the journal was written contemporaneously, it provides an audit trail of the incident and reduces reliance on distant retrospective reconstruction.
- Maria's short written response produced later in the same lesson after she returned and settled. This learner artifact is a tangible record of how she returned to the task after the emotion subsided. It is presented as a facsimile (created to preserve her anonymity): the wording, spelling and rough layout are retained, but not her handwriting or identifying features.

Analytic approach

The two traces (the contemporaneous teacher journal entry and the post-incident learner artifact) were analyzed abductively through a theory-informed interpretive process. This analytic approach involved iterative movement between the empirical traces and relevant theoretical constructs, allowing emerging interpretations to be refined through ongoing engagement with frameworks on face, identity, investment and affect ([Timmermans and](#)

Tavory, 2012). Analytic memos written during repeated re-reading documented the development of interpretations and their theoretical connections.

As this is a practitioner case, the aim is not to generalize to all learners but to provide a closely contextualized analytic example that may resonate with other educational contexts. In this sense, the study contributes through analytic rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018), offering a theoretically informed interpretation that may inform understanding of comparable affective ruptures in adult migrant writing contexts, where learners bring complex histories and high-stakes professional aspirations.

Trustworthiness and rigor

Trustworthiness and rigor were established through qualitative criteria associated with credibility, transferability and dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement over six months, comprising an estimated 350–400 h of classroom interaction, enabled interpretation of the rupture against an established baseline of classroom identity, participation patterns and affective responses. This sustained contact enhanced credibility by allowing the incident to be understood as atypical rather than routine.

Thick description of the task, interaction sequence and affective cues allows readers to evaluate plausibility and transferability of the interpretation. The pairing of a contemporaneous teacher journal with a learner-produced artifact provides perspectival triangulation across teacher- and learner-side traces of the same event. Reflexive memoing and explicit acknowledgement of the teacher-researcher's interpretive role further supports dependability.

Positionality and ethics

As a teacher-researcher, my positionality shaped both data generation and interpretation. I write as Maria's teacher, and the incident was one I experienced in real time rather than observed from outside. This closeness gave me a detailed understanding of her usual confidence and persistence, making the rupture especially visible. At the same time, being her teacher meant I had pedagogical authority and an emotional stake in what occurred, so I approach the incident reflexively – as a co-constructed classroom moment shaped by both learner history and teaching context. Reflexivity is central to practitioner research, particularly where the researcher occupies a dual role as teacher and analyst, and interpretations are shaped by positionality and relational proximity (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). In reporting it here, I aim to represent Maria with care, to minimize identifying detail and to keep the focus on what the episode reveals for teaching rather than on judging the learner.

Findings

The critical incident: Adversity writing task

In one of our routine lesson cycles, I set Maria a paragraph-writing task. She was actively preparing for the PTE exam which she needed to pass before starting her nursing degree program within the upcoming few months. Therefore, I was conscious that she needed to practice and expand her writing skills to have a chance of passing. The task was presented as follows: "Describe an adversity you faced, how you handled it, and what was the outcome." The exercise was scaffolded by sentence starters, with the option of taking the example from a personal or professional experience. I also explained that reflective tasks such as this were relevant to job applications, personal statements and even writing tasks in the PTE. Below was the observed emotional response.

Maria began, but almost instantly there were physical indications that something was wrong: she stiffened her body, gave an angry look and loudly sighed. I asked her if she was all right and had to say something. In an ever more agitated voice she replied, “I don’t like this.” I gave her assurances and time, but soon after she threw her notebook on the desk and bolted out of the room in tears, and later explained: “This is what I always do. I run away.”

This reaction was particularly unexpected in class context: Maria usually was the warmest and most supportive of her classmates, frequently offering her peers words of encouragement. Her behavior contrasted with her typical demeanor: open, talkative and hardworking. As a student who often exclaimed, “Hard work always pays off,” “I never give up” and “If you fall, get back up,” Maria had high expectations for herself and a great deal of motivation to succeed. But this assignment produced an immediate affective rupture. Importantly, this rupture was episodic rather than a stable learner trait. In writing, Maria was revealed as vulnerable – a feeling that did not align with her preferred view of herself as a strong, able and disciplined adult learner. The writing prompt, which demanded personal reflection and self-expression, appeared to have brought together identity threat, emotional memory and fear of exposure. Writing – and in particular reflective writing – required her to make visible aspects of vulnerability that did not align with her preferred self-understanding as a competent and disciplined adult learner. Her resistance may have had less to do with not being able to do the writing and more to do with these issues.

Teacher’s journal

The following was an entry I wrote in my teacher’s journal immediately after the incident described above:

A writing activity was set this morning to help students practice constructing paragraphs: “Describe a problem or adversity that you have had. What happened? How did you overcome or solve it? What was the outcome or result?” It was a scaffolded task — adversity, response, outcome — and students could write about any example, personal or professional.

After I described the activity Maria remained seated at her desk while her pen hovered above her notebook. Then she frowned. “You can use a small example,” I told her. “From your personal life, or from your professional life.” she pressed her lips together, her eyes filling with tears and said, “No [...] I can’t”.

I settled onto her desk and ran through the steps again, nodding toward the sentence starters written on the whiteboard — she shook her head and said, “I don’t like this.” Her voice grew tense as she said, “I hate writing. I want to run away”.

Minutes later her resistance had set in. She shut her notebook and pushed it aside, then walked straight out without speaking. When she returned she said to me: “This is what I always do. I run away. This is what my father also says. This is what I did in my last marriage also. When it got hard I left.

What made this outburst so striking was that Maria was not someone who gave up easily in class. Far from it – she was among the most motivated students I had taught. She would often say, “Hard work always pays off. One should never give up. If you fall, you get back up.” She completed a diploma in engineering in her home country and has demonstrated the capacity for academic work. She evidences drive toward her aim of nursing in Australia, knowing English is essential for passing IELTS or PTE.

Her refusal to write, then, was not a repudiation of learning or lack of motivation. It revealed something more complex. The task that I had asked her to do seems to have exposed her vulnerabilities in a way that was too direct. Compared to her own understanding of herself as a competent, hard-working professional, her stilted English sentences on the page

were more closely associated with being “weak,” and visible as such in a public classroom space. Her emotional reaction – the tears, the desire to escape and the declaration “I always run away” – can be understood as a protective strategy, a reflex to protect her self-understanding as someone who succeeds through hard work and ability.

Ironically, the same ambition that drives Maria toward success also fuels her resistance. The more that she prizes hard work and competence, the more difficult it is to find herself in situations where her own efforts show her as incompetent. Writing in this moment became more than a language learning task. It was an identity threat.

Post-incident learner artifact

After returning to the classroom and settling, Maria produced a short-written response to the adversity prompt. This artifact in recreated facsimile form (*verbatim* text, including original spelling and grammar, original handwriting removed for anonymity) to provide a learner-side trace of her post-incident meaning-making.

Adversity

What =>? challenge

How =>? Resolve/manage

What? out come/result

Synonyms Antonym

Hardship Good times,

Misfortune

Difficulty

Adversity

Adversity – challenging situations.

What kinds of challenges I’am coming thogh.

To move from one country to another, it is

not easy situation, to leave your job,
friends, family and start over and again.

How I am resolve that a new challenge
in my life, we are become more
strong when we going thogh the challenges.

I am studying English and it is my
first step to move on. Then I will
get a job, study and a new place
to work, new friends.

What out come from challenging
situation I become mentoly more
strongle.

The post-incident artifact above shows Maria re-entering the task through definitional vocabulary work and a cautiously generalized migration narrative, suggesting a shift from rupture to controlled identity-safe meaning-making. The artifact is organized around the task’s scaffold (adversity → response → outcome) and foregrounds migration and resilience as the central themes. It contains a clear future-oriented statement of investment in English and professional re-entry. This learner-produced text, thus, serves as a second trace of the event and a basis for interpreting the rupture beyond teacher observation alone.

Discussion

This classroom incident raises broader questions about the affective, identity-related and social aspects of adult language learning. Students’ writing reluctance is often interpreted

through deficit-oriented explanations such as low motivation or low confidence. This case suggests another possibility: that learners with strong professional identities may resist writing not because they lack commitment, but because the task threatens a valued sense of self. Analysis of this incident is guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier, particularly face (Goffman, 1955), investment (Norton, 2013), affect as socially mediated (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2014) and views on emotion and adult learning (Dirkx, 2006). Viewed through the lens of resistance literature (Canagarajah, 1993; Benesch, 2001; Toohey, 2000), Maria's reaction could also be framed as agency, interpreting withdrawal as acting on identity threat rather than disengagement. From this perspective, resistance is not simply oppositional behavior but also a meaningful response to classroom positioning and the perceived risks of self-exposure.

Maria's refusal to write can be understood neither simply as lack of motivation nor as stable or generalized resistance to writing. In fact, her response may be affective and identity-protective, and it can be illuminated from the perspectives of several overlapping theories. Applying Goffman's (1955) concept of face, Maria's withdrawal can be interpreted as a face-saving response to a task that risked publicly exposing perceived inadequacy. Her response to the writing task may be construed as a face-saving act, as proceeding with the activity would likely have led to a loss of face (competent adult, engineer and driven student) given that it would have publicly revealed what she would have perceived as her language deficiency.

It is important to note that "negative" emotions like embarrassment or avoidance in language classrooms do not reflect personal deficits; instead, they reveal structural and identity-related tensions (Benesch, 2017). Using Benesch's (2017) critical affect theory lens, Maria's resistance could be seen to reflect broader tension between her strong professional identity and migrant learner status. For newly arrived migrants, affective reactions, whether of shame, avoidance or frustration can reflect deep tensions between their prior professional identities and the status of being positioned as "beginners" in a new linguistic and social order (Blackledge and Creese, 2010).

Maria's experience demonstrates the centrality of emotion in adult learning. Dirkx (2006) argued that emotions are not obstacles but integral to meaning-making and deep learning. Resistance often signals inner conflict or transformation. Maria's withdrawal, emotional outburst and utterance "I want to run away" represented a moment where emotion, identity and learning collided; it signaled her inner conflict. Her breakdown revealed writing as an affective trigger, evoking a personal history of "running away," a coping mechanism she linked to both marital breakdown and current classroom stress. The writing task, thus, became more than a cognitive challenge: it was not only an emotional mirror of past and present struggles but also a potential space where transformation could take place.

It was not merely Maria's prior occupational literacy history and affective or identity background that combined to produce an acute sense of vulnerability but also her future goal orientation. Norton's (2013) theory of investment and identity argues that learners invest in language learning when they perceive it as contributing to their desired identities. Maria's investment in learning English was high because of her nursing goal, yet that same investment made failure emotionally risky.

This tension is also visible in the learner's post-incident response to the same task. The post-incident artifact provides an important companion trace to the rupture because it shows what becomes writable once Maria has re-regulated. Her uptake begins not with a personal disclosure but with definitional and lexical work (synonyms/antonyms; a general definition of "adversity"), suggesting an initial repositioning of the task into a safer academic genre.

When she shifts into narrative, the account remains generalized (“to move from one country to another...”) rather than event-specific, indicating controlled distancing from potentially painful memory. Yet within this protected frame, she performs identity repair by re-asserting resilience and a future professional trajectory (“studying English... first step... then I will get a job”), echoing the competent, goal-driven self-described earlier. Read alongside the refusal, the artifact supports the argument that her resistance was not a rejection of learning but a strategy for managing the affective and identity costs of reflective writing in a public classroom space. This post-incident meaning-making suggests that once the immediate threat to face and identity was reduced, participation became possible – but only through careful management of exposure. This interpretation aligns with the theoretical perspective that affective responses in language learning are shaped by identity positioning and perceived exposure rather than by language ability alone.

Viewed from the perspective of linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2017), Maria’s response might be understood as an embodied and affective experience of language. Writing in English in this context was not simply a cognitive task but also one filtered through personal histories, memories and biography. This perspective helps explain how autobiographical writing prompts may activate affective responses that move beyond linguistic competence toward much more identity-laden aspects of language.

As an interpretive synthesis rather than a causal explanation, the conceptual model proposed below brings together these interacting influences. Figure 1 maps the overlapping domains that shaped Maria’s writing resistance: her identity and affective history, her occupational literacy background and her future-oriented goal pressure. This model visualizes the convergence of Goffman’s notion of face, Benesch’s structural/critical lens, Dirkx’s affective learning theory and Norton’s investment framework. Each lens helps illuminate how emotional and identity-based forces interact within the vocational classroom. Developed from one critical incident, this model does not claim representational generalizability; instead, it offers analytic generalization by theorizing interacting domains that may be transferable to comparable adult migrant writing contexts.

Table 1 elaborates how each domain may be experienced affectively and manifested in classroom behavior. The relationships presented in Table 1 are interpretive rather than causal and are derived from the interaction between theoretical frameworks and the empirical traces in this case. The model is intended as a heuristic for understanding possible dimensions of writing resistance rather than as a definitive or generalizable structure.

Together, the figure and table above offer a transferable heuristic for examining similar ruptures across adult migrant writing contexts.

Table 1. Factors contributing to writing resistance

Factors	Type of influence	Emotional impact	Classroom manifestation
Identity and face	Social / psychological	Fear of judgment	Avoidance, silence
Affective history	Emotional / cognitive	Anxiety, shame	Hesitation, withdrawal
Occupational literacy history	Experiential / structural	Confusion, genre mismatch	Preference for familiar formats, use of generalized responses (discursive distancing)
Future orientation (goal pressure)	Motivational / temporal	Pressure, fear of failure	Overinvestment, perfectionism
Source(s): Author’s own work			

Limitations

This study is based on a single critical incident and a limited set of data sources, including a teacher journal and a learner-produced artifact. While prolonged engagement provides contextual depth, the analysis remains interpretive and situated within a specific classroom context. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable but to offer analytic insight (Yin, 2018).

In addition, the teacher-researcher position brings both strength and limitations: it allows for deep knowledge of context while necessitating care with reflexivity about subjectivity. Future research involving multiple cases, other data sources and learner perspectives could extend and elaborate the conceptual model proposed here.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed a critical incident of reflective writing resistance in an Australian adult migrant English classroom where learners were preparing for work and further vocational training. The analysis suggests that resistance to reflective writing cannot be understood through language skill or motivation alone. Although the article centers on one rupture moment, it is informed by prolonged engagement: I taught Maria for roughly six months (three days a week, over five hours a day). This provided a sufficiently stable baseline for recognizing her usual classroom identity as highly invested, resilient and professionally aspirational. Viewing her exit from the classroom then, in light of that backstory, was affective evidence not of disengagement but of an immediate clash involving reflective-genre imposition, identity/face threat and past memory. Her post-incident artifact further shows that re-entry into the task became possible only through cautious, identity-safe meaning-making – beginning with definitional literacy, moving to a generalized migration narrative and culminating in a future-oriented professional self.

Building from this single case, the multi-domain model proposed here offers analytic and conceptual transferability to comparable adult migrant and vocational writing contexts where learners bring complex identity histories and high-stakes future orientations into classroom literacy practices by identifying four interacting domains: identity and face, affective history, occupational literacy history and future orientation or goal pressure. These domains may help interpret similar ruptures across adult migrant writing contexts. For practice, the case highlights the need to treat writing resistance as communicative and protective, to provide lower-exposure pathways into reflective tasks and to acknowledge the identity costs of “writing as a beginner” for adults with strong professional histories. Further work across additional cases can explore and refine the model’s transferability, but this incident already underscores a central point: in adult migrant classrooms, reflective writing is as much an affective and identity event as it is a language task.

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