

Examining the Role of Model Texts in Writing Instruction

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Abstract

Model texts are a common tool writing teachers utilize to assist students in tackling new, unfamiliar genres. Model texts provide a concrete example for learners to understand what is to be expected as a finished product and to process the rhetorical structures, conventions, and organizational features within the text. By noticing and developing an awareness of rhetorical modes, L2 learners can eventually apply their knowledge more creatively in future writing tasks. The following paper reviews the existing literature concerning the effectiveness and application of model texts in writing. An overview of the advantages and disadvantages in how model texts are implemented, highlights some of the pertinent issues related to the teaching and learning practices. Lastly, although scholars have generally advocated the use of models in the literature and have been applied in empirical studies, little has been written which specifically addresses the practical needs of teachers. Thus, this paper offers instructors several guidelines to consider when incorporating model texts into the writing process.

Introduction

Lack of English proficiency in academic writing can be a major obstacle for second language learners who wish to enter postgraduate programs at universities overseas. For many nonnative students in undergraduate programs, argumentative writing is a standard genre in second language writing courses. Despite the prominence of argumentative writing, this form of writing has been found to be the most difficult for L2 learners because it requires sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly, & Lewis, 2007). Argumentative writing is a complex and dynamic literacy practice where a writer must establish a dialogic relationship with the audience to assert and defend a point of view and use convincing evidence to support their ideas (Álvarez, 2001). Learning this form of writing allows learners to "craft knowledge" (Kellogg, 2008), adopt rhetorical conventions and academic genres, develop an authentic and authorial voice, and move them from disciplinary awareness to disciplinary identity.

The lack of exposure in learning academic writing in second language high school programs has contributed to the difficulty in developing writing proficiency. Students often have an inadequate understanding of how to organize texts (Ballard &

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Clanchy, 1993) and the specific demands that a written genre requires (Kern, 2000). Ample time is not given to L2 learners to utilize strategies to interact and engage with the reader, signal confidence in claims, and indicate authorial presence. Another obstacle is gaining the ability to appropriate those conventions for creative and rhetorical purposes (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Johns et al., 2006). Given that most students entering university English language writing programs are novices regarding academic writing and research, teaching under those circumstances, can be a formidable undertaking.

Recently scholars in second language writing have advocated the use of model texts as valid pedagogical tools to develop writing skills in L2 contexts. The concept of modeling has its origins in the genre-based approach. The purpose of the genre-based approach is for learners to develop an awareness of the structure and purpose of different text types, assisting them to analyze these features, and then replicating the features in their writing. Writing instruction in a genre-based approach involves three phases: a) modeling, b) joint negotiation of the text by teachers and learners, and c) the independent construction of the text by learners (Hammond et al., 1992). The modeling stage gives learners an opportunity to examine the purpose, overall structure, and linguistic features of the target text they are going to write. The joint construction of text is a form of collaborative writing with the instructor playing a key role in scaffolding learners' writing by providing the input about the nature of a text type. In this stage, learners perform written exercises that manipulate the relevant language forms. In the last stage—the independent construction of text—learners produce actual texts by choosing topics, conducting research, and writing multiple drafts.

Two characteristics of genre-based writing activities are particularly salient: the concept of modeling and the explicit instruction of the genre. Hyland (2004) claims that the modeling stage aids students to explore the genre and understand its rhetorical structures or frames and formulaic sequences. The explicit teaching of genre promotes an awareness of its conventions as well as underscores the need for reflection concerning its purpose and use (Bastian, 2010). Genre-based writing instruction is considered to be situated social action that values collaboration and scaffolding (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975) into the writing process and encourages confident writers to help their weaker peers in need of improved competence (Lin, Monroe, & Troia, 2007).

Models are valued in genre-based writing instruction because they allow learners to (1) raise an awareness of the targeted rhetorical conventions (Hyland, 2003, 2004); (2) create a mental model of the genre (Crinon & Legros, 2002); and (3) ease some of the anxiety associated with writing a new genre (Macbeth, 2010). Proponents of genre-based approaches argue that instruction will vary depending on the learning context. L1 students, for instance, are immersed in the values and beliefs of the cultural mainstream and are likely to share the teacher's familiarity with a genre. Explicit instruction is therefore not needed. However, in L2 writing contexts, models alone are considered insufficient for L2 writers since learners are less aware of the patterns and variation across genres (Hyland, 2003). As such, they are unlikely to benefit from inductive approaches that provide little time for consciousness-raising activities to draw learners' attention to the target rhetorical features.

Existing Research on Model Texts

One of the earliest studies examined the impact modeling has on first language (L1) learners. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1984) analyzed texts used in several genres and concluded that models were beneficial for students in developing discrete elements of language and content, but they had little effect on learning more global aspects of form. In another L1 study, Charney and Carlson (1995) examined the effect of the kinds of models offered to undergraduate students in writing a methods section in a research report. The researchers compared a control group (those who read three effective models) and two treatment groups (those who read three models of varying quality). Both treatment groups receiving the mixed versions of the model texts produced more salient and topical information, manifested better organization, and chose more relevant information than the control group. A later study by Crinon and Legros (2002) found that the use of models helped young L1 learners increase the amount of detail they added in narrative writing. The results of these three studies suggest that learners benefit from the models by allowing learners to provide more detailed information in their writing.

Hillocks (1986) argues that although modeling is widely used to teach writing in L1 contexts, little is known about its effectiveness. In fact, Hillocks' meta-analysis (1986) of 60 experimental studies examining the use of modeling revealed that other kinds of intervention could have a greater impact on the quality of students' writing. Despite Hillocks' early work, more recent studies have indicated that models are powerful pedagogic tools when they are integrated with instruction. Smagorinsky's research (1992) on L1 learners compared three treatments of models; models alone, models with explicit instruction throughout the composition process, and models with writing exercises that focused on targeted rhetorical features. The results indicated that reading models alone are insufficient to improve writing. Stolarek (1994) investigated the effect of models. Participants included 143 university first-year students and 21 composition instructors at an American university. The students were divided into five groups: description only, explication, model only, description with model, and explication with model. Stolarek's study examined several features in the texts which included paragraph formatting, use of the third person, and the amount of detail. He found that the students in the description/explication only and model only groups performed poorly compared to the groups that received a combination of model with description and/or explication. These early research findings in L1 contexts illustrate the necessity of implementing instructional activities and explanations when model texts are introduced.

There is a paucity of studies on the effectiveness of genre-based approach with L2 learners. A number of studies have found that L2 writers utilize models (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Casanave, 1998; Tardy, 2009) and that L2 writers use them to address their lexicogrammatical errors during the feedback process (Qi & Lapkin, 2001). However, only one study compared the use of models with other instructional techniques. Henry and Roseberry (1998) did an experimental study using tourist information texts to examine the impact of explicit instruction in the modeling stage within a genre-based approach. Participants were divided into two groups; one provided with explicit instruction of the model texts and another that was not. The genre group read several examples of the target texts, analyzed the organizational and lexicogrammatical features, and revised flawed versions of the model texts. In contrast, the non genre group completed traditional grammar exercises relevant to the

written task. After three weeks, differences in the gain in scores on pretests and posttests revealed that the genre-based groups made considerable improvement in the organization, cohesion, and persuasiveness of their texts. In contrast, the non genre group's scores did not significantly improve. Henry and Roseberry's study (1998) reaffirms the claim that explicit instruction is an important supplement in the modeling stage for L2 learners.

A qualitative study by Macbeth (2010) has found that the modeling stage provides lower proficiency L2 writers with the support needed to generate salient features commonly found in writing such as thesis statements, topic sentences, and supporting sentences. Macbeth claims that models facilitated instruction and offered learners a visible roadmap on how to write their essays. Lastly, Ferreira (2007) examined the impact of the genre-based approach on learners' writing argumentative texts with the participation of six ESL first-year students in a North American university. Despite a short two-week period of instruction, the findings showed that participants improved their argumentative writing on the level of organization, argumentation, and thesis construction.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Model texts

The research to date is far from conclusive, but scholars generally agree that model texts are a vital component in the writing process. Swales (1990) maintains that the inclusion of models helps learners to focus on the formal and functional properties of a text and the strong associations that exist between them. It is necessary for writing instructors to tie the formal and functional properties of a language together to facilitate learners' recognition of how and why linguistic conventions are employed for particular rhetorical effects (Bhatia, 2004). If learners have opportunities to analyze the rhetorical structure of content, common patterns can be identified in each genre. These patterns will provide background knowledge for learners to activate in the next learning situation.

Some have argued that an approach that incorporates models is more effective for learners to advance their writing skills in a second language than other approaches because it helps free students from their anxiety about writing (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). For this reason, the genre-based instruction is seen to be more suitable for learners at the beginning or intermediate levels of proficiency in a second language rather than those at advanced levels. When writers learn a new genre, they commonly want to find some cases that they can refer to or consider as samples. There is little doubt that writing tasks can be more demanding than other language skills, so students at low levels of proficiency absolutely need something that they can rely on since they have little exposure to English writing. Moreover, it also allows students to become more flexible in their thinking and eventually realize how authors organize their writings.

Despite the advantages that modeling can have in helping learners to produce written work, several concerns have been voiced by scholars. The most common issue is that the use of model texts do little to facilitate the process of imparting meaning in L2 writing. Modeling hinders learners' creative thoughts about content (Bawarshi, 2000), and that it overlooks natural processes of learning and creativity (Badger & White, 2000). Critics also claim that many L2 writing instructors follow a predetermined sequence of models and activities in their lessons. This approach, they

argue, is misguided since assumptions are made regarding problems students will encounter rather than discovering them in a continual process of assessment that should occur throughout the writing process. An additional concern is that because teachers spend class time explaining the features and conventions of a certain genre, learners are likely to be more passive.

The use of modeling and instruction is potentially reductionist; ignoring the complex nature of different genres and how organizational and rhetorical features can be manipulated to serve a writer's purpose could be problematic (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Johns, 1995). Models may be misinterpreted as a formulaic way to write and lead students to believe that there is one standard format for writing a genre. Students may end up writing genres as meaningless reproductions of the models they learned. Students are more likely to apply models inappropriately or too literally to their particular rhetorical situation (Smagorinsky, 1992; Werner, 1989). To counter this outcome, Macbeth (2010) cautions that teachers must help students to move from writing in a simplified and artificial style toward manipulating features found in the model to serve their own purpose.

Guidelines for ELTs

Several important implications for second language writing pedagogy can be derived from the body of research on model texts and genre-based approaches. The following is a set of guidelines to help teachers implement model texts effectively in their writing courses.

Incorporating Models That Are Suitable for Learners

A somewhat obvious but critical issue for teachers implementing model texts in an L2 writing context is selecting texts that meet the interests, needs, and level of their students (Triastuti, 2011). If any of these three objectives are not met, students can develop negative attitudes toward writing which will inhibit motivation. To mitigate this problem, Triastuti (2011) suggests that writing instructors acquire experience and training in evaluating and adapting materials. Professional development programs, for instance, can address this issue by providing training to less experienced teachers on how to analyze and evaluate model texts. Exercises can be offered for groups of teachers to assess or tweak existing texts used in the writing program. If this process is recursive and procedural, then models can be continually revised and assessed to enhance learning. Activities can also accompany the model texts so learning can be scaffolded. Repair exercises on faulty model texts, for instance, can give learners exposure in the identification of the rhetorical structures and patterns and offer opportunities for learners and teachers to establish a dialogue in how models should be utilized. Lastly, teachers can use exemplary work submitted by students to serve as model texts. These student-texts can be an extremely powerful motivating tool for learners to emulate.

Incorporating Model Texts throughout the Writing Process

In reviewing the mixed record on models texts in writing, Smagorinsky (1992) indicates that in several studies where models failed to improve performance, the

models were available to learners only before they wrote. Smagorinsky also reveals that writers need ample time to develop enough content knowledge to take advantage of the models for the genres they are learning. For modeling to be successful, it should be accessible throughout the process and be scaffolded to allow learners to incorporate the most basic rhetorical features and conventions first and, as learning progresses, these basic model designs can become more complex. With Google Docs, for example, model texts can be stored in a shared folder online, and embedded hyperlinks on assignment sheets can direct learners to these documents. Teachers adopting a multiple-draft process approach can layer their assignments to include a particular aspect of the model (e.g., an introduction in an argumentative essay) that students need to write. Depending on how successful learners are in developing their writing proficiency in the genre being learned, more complex models should be introduced.

Rubrics can also play an important function if teachers include criteria that refer to the features found in the model texts. Goobric is a useful tool for creating rubrics and assessments of those rubrics can be appended to students submitted Google Doc assignments. For example, if a writing instructor is teaching the argumentative writing genre, then a model text and a rubric can be utilized to include and assess the salient features found in this type of writing such as a claim, reason, and evidence. In doing so, teachers would encourage students to re-examine the model texts when trying to write and revise their own drafts. This process engenders accountability in the accuracy and quality of their writing—a hallmark of autonomous learning. Additionally, peer feedback and instructor comments can address how well students are emulating the rhetorical features found in the models. One last area of consideration for teachers, one that is directly related to rubrics and assessment, is determining the number of writing features learners should target when using models. Smagorinsky's research (1992) found that students were more successful in incorporating only a few writing features from the models at a time. Introducing a complex list of conventions and rhetorical features can overwhelm learners cognitive load and inhibit the process. Thus, it is pertinent for teachers to limit targeted items and incorporate them into their mode of assessment.

Utilizing Model Texts in Student-teacher Conferences

Student-teacher conferences can be an ideal setting for teachers to check students' understanding of rhetorical structures and organizational patterns. The conferences are a good opportunity to determine the degree to which the patterns can be applied to their own writing. Student-teacher conferences often range between 5-10 minutes which can leave teachers, particularly those who cannot prioritize or target specific issues, feeling overwhelmed. Model texts, on the other hand, provide a concrete backdrop that encourages structured and focused discussion between a teacher and a student. Having the model and student text side-by-side on a computer allows for comparisons to be made throughout the writing conference and lead students to generate their own ideas and solutions to strengthen their writing. Research has revealed that writing conferences are less effective when teachers confuse quality with quantity (Oye, 1993), emphasize mechanics and grammar (Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989) and have little understanding of the students' purposes or provide complicated suggestions (Nickel, 2001). Making reference to

models during conferencing avoids these issues by assisting teachers in drawing learners' attention to the targeted rhetorical features, not on the number of words or the accuracy of the grammatical structures. By allotting time in class to explain model texts, students should have a clear purpose (similar to one seen in the model text) and ample time to review how the conventions are used to create meaning in the text.

Providing Exposure for Learners to Read Texts That Reflect Writing Tasks

It is important to recognize that gaining experience in reading is an essential step in understanding the way writers work. Assisting learners to read texts from a writer's perspective and to respond to what they read creates an awareness of different writing techniques and strategies. Typically, reading materials introduced in a writing course are used to stimulate interest on a topic or issue but they can and should also serve as models for writing and examples of genres. One option to encourage reading, particularly if written work is submitted digitally, would be to allow students to assess other students' files. This kind of activity promotes a community of learning where students can read material that is meaningful to them, relevant to their lives, and useful for addressing their concerns. Students can also be encouraged to find academic texts within the larger academic community that appeal to them in the way the prose is structured and organized. Encouraging students to recognize good models to emulate from and allotting time and activities in class to evaluate academic texts is a key step in developing critical literacy skills.

Concluding Thoughts

The following guidelines offered in this paper offer a glimpse of the possibilities regarding how teachers can utilize models in their classrooms. Given the ubiquity of models in both L1 and L2 writing contexts, it is somewhat surprising that there has been very little empirical research conducted on the effectiveness of models to inform instruction. Although some studies do shed light on how learners can utilize models to confront the challenges in learning new genres, research is far from conclusive and more inquiry is needed to build a solid foundation that allows teachers from making informed decisions about implementing models effectively in their classrooms.

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