

WRITING MODELS: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PATRICK MCCOY

Introduction

It goes without saying that most EFL writing instructors use textbooks to teach writing. Within the texts there are a number of essay examples for students to consult as they begin writing their first essays. However, this becomes problematic when the content of the course dictates that students produce a specific genre of writing, a literary analysis essay, for example, for a course rather than a general expository essay. In these cases, a model essay can be very effective in providing students with an example to consult as they begin the writing process for their original versions of the essay assignment. There are several pitfalls that lie in wait for students, but careful planning can result in effective use of writing models in an EFL writing class.

Main Issues with Using Writing Models

The use of writing models has been a controversial subject for quite some time. It seems the main issue for many instructors is the idea is that it encourages passive imitation, which was pointed out by Zamel (2001), Hyland (2004), and Hirvela (2004). Another issue identified by Eschholz (1980), suggested that using models before the writing process can be unwarranted, inhibit a writers' original thoughts, and essentially ignores the standard steps in the writing process.

However, for novices of academic writing, the curriculum creates a paradox. Since students are expected to know already to some extent what they are attempting to learn how to do as a means of understanding the instruction in how to do it (Amerine & Bilmes, 1988; Bartholomae, 1985).

Furthermore, this paradox lies in the philosophical realm since the instructions for the assignment will not mean much without a model to refer to. And yet, a model cannot be produced without the instructions. Managing this situation begins with what the students are able to do (Amerine & Bilmes, 1988; Macbeth, 2006). Then the instructor must assess what their students are capable of writing at the current state of their development when giving a particular writing assignment. Therefore, if students have never written a research paper it would seem likely that a model that reflects the final result would be of great use to those particular students. Another solution proposed by Texas A & M University (2008) suggests using multiple models for each essay, which might be an ideal solution but may not be practical for many teachers due to time constraints. Sargent (2014) used models for all four essays in his course for teacher-students. However, this did not strictly follow the article's suggestion to offer multiple examples, due to lack of time. One example was made for each essay. Thus, the instructors involved believed that by providing the students with examples for each essay they were able to reduce the chances of unthinking related to the essays.

Another major concern brought up by several researchers relates to the concern of when to use models during instruction. Eschholz (1980) and Zamel (1983) stated that presenting models before students start the writing assignment inhibits writers' original expressions and ignores the standard writing process. It was suggested that models be presented after learners had finished writing as a source for process writing. (Watson, 1982) Hanaoka (2006) reported that 75% of the students' problems were solvable by delaying the introduction of independent models. As a result, models can have a positive effect on writing as feedback if used at the right time.

The application of models is also an important factor to examine. Consider this quote from Stephen Krashen (1984): "The ability to write is hypothesized to be the result of reading." (p.23) Therefore writing models can be useful in introducing students to new genres of writing that

they might not encounter outside the classroom such as literary analysis or research writing. Swales has suggested that there should be an emphasis on the importance of studying different genres (1990). This idea is supported by Crinon and Legros (2002) who claim that it helps the students create their own mental model of the genre essay. In addition, Macbeth (2010) maintains that their use can help alleviate apprehension related to writing in a new genre. Hyland (2004) also points out the use of writing models for highlighting rhetorical conventions. In fact there could be a use for analysis of texts, Bagheri and Zane (2009:3) “by analyzing the text model essays, L2 writers become aware of how particular grammatical features are used in authentic discourse contexts.”

Discussion

Despite the controversial issues regarding the use of writing models in an EFL writing class, there are a number of other reasons for doing so. According to Sargent, “...my story clearly shows that the use of the model essays had a positive effect on the teacher’s (students here) own writing: improvements in organization, writing paragraphs, improved signposting, greater coherence through improved ability to link paragraphs. (2014, p.26) The instructor had a number of outcomes related to writing that he was able to focus and monitor over the duration of his writing course. In addition, there is evidence, according to Abbuhl (2011, p.2), that shows that beginning writers also benefit in their ‘discrete elements of language’ by using models, which helped students organize essays better allowing mistakes to be more easily identified. There were a number of other benefits highlighted by Iwata (2017) in a course he taught. For example, participants responded positively to the writing course, including the feedback and models. He also noted that presenting multiple models before writing may be effective with limitations in place to promote originality. In addition, he suggests that models may alleviate the student’s mental burden in terms of the initial writing process, structuring, and time used. Finally, he points out that instructors may

benefit from models to focus on correcting a few points instead of the whole text.

Conclusion

It would seem that models are most necessary when students are required to write in genres they might not be familiar with. This was the case for this instructor who was asked to teach an introductory course, Sophomore Reading and Writing, which requires students to write two literary analysis papers and two research-based papers in cultural studies and linguistics. Furthermore, a linguistics course, Junior Composition, requires junior students to write four longer research-based papers as preparation for their capstone senior thesis the following year. In an effort to relieve the burden of such daunting tasks high scoring student essays were collected and used as a basis for discussion and essay analysis about what the students did well and what they did poorly. However, many student still borrowed much too liberally from the models-especially the introductions. It was something that was discouraged in teacher-student conferences whenever possible. Teaching writing to second language learners is a challenging process fraught with error. That being said writing models are a necessary tool, since many students have had very little exposure to any kind of writing by the time they have gotten to college. In addition, the freshman writing course students in the department must take an introductory course that prepares the students to write the basic five-paragraph essay without introducing the use of outside support. Many students have not done this in academic Japanese classes either-so it is very much a foreign concept. Hopefully, models combined with peer feedback will offer students a few examples of the genres that they are introduced to which may give them insight into what is possible in literary analysis and research based paper writing.

References

- Abbuhi, R. (2011). Using models in writing instruction: A comparison with native and non-native speakers of English. Sage Open October. Available at <http://sgo.sagepub/early/2011/11/01/2158244011426295.full#ref-38>
- Amerine, R., & Bilmes, J. (1988) Following instructions. *Human Studies*, 4, 1-16.
- Bagheri, M.S. and M.Zare. (2009). *The role of using IELTS model essays in improving learners' writing and their awareness of writing features*. JELS, Vol.1, No.1, Fall 2009, 115-130.
- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In M. Rose (Ed.). *When a writer can't write* (pp.134-165). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Crinon, J. and D. Legros. (2002). The semantic effects of consulting a textual database on rewriting. *Learning and Instruction*.12:605-626.
- Eschholz, P.A. (1980). The prose models approach: Using products in the process. In T.R. Donovan & B.W. McClelland (EDs.), *Eight approaches to teaching composition* (pp. 21-36). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Hanaoka, O. (2006). Exploring the role of models in promoting noticing in L2 writing. *JACET Bulletin*, 42, 1-13.
- Hirvela, A. (2004). *Connecting Reading and writing in second language writing instruction*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hyland, K. (2004). *Genre and second language writers*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Iwata, A. (2017). Developing contextually sensitive free writing pedagogy: Transitioning from a product approach to a process approach. *The Language Teacher*, 41 (5), 11-16.
- Krashen, S. (1984). *Writing: research, theory and applications*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Macbeth, K. (2006) Diverse, unforeseen, and quaint difficulties: The sensible responses of novices learning to follow directions in academic writing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41, 180-197.
- Macbeth, K. (2010). Deliberate false provisions: the use and usefulness of models in learning academic writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 19: 33-48.
- Sargent, D. (2014) Using model essays to create good writers. *Language learning, Discourse and communication*, Second language learning and teaching. (pp.23-36) Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Texas, A. and M. University, 2008. Examples that teach: Using writing models effectively. Available at: <http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/2008/examples-that-teach-using-writing-models-effectively/>
- Watson, C. (1982). The use and abuse of models in the ESL writing class. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16,5-16.

Zamel, V. (2001). Teaching Composition in the ESL Classroom: What We Can Learn from Research in the Teaching of English. *Landmark essays on ESL writing*, eds T. Silva and P.K. Matsuda, 27-35. New Jersey: Hermagoras Press.