MODELING AS A STEP TOWARDS SUCCESS IN GENRE-BASED WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in a specific genre requires being acquainted with the writing conventions of that genre (e.g., linguistic, lexical, and rhetorical features) and the sociorhetorical goals of texts (e.g., the ability to deploy these writing conventions) within that genre. Learning to participate effectively in a writing community is intimidating for all students, particularly for international students writing in a second language. Providing students with different model texts that they can imitate and rely on gives students access to target conventions (Charney and Carlson, 1995). Analysis of student writing over the semester, coupled with their reflections, suggests that explicitly teaching the five principles is a powerful provision of student control over course content. In this paper, we will discuss the instructional practices of a graduate genre-based class that was offered as part of a doctoral-level program at a large research university. The course was incorporated into the curriculum to help international graduate students develop their writing skills.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

THE VALUE OF MODELING IN GENRE-BASED INSTRUCTION

Model texts are valued for facilitating the understanding of a new genre (Abbuhl, 2011). Research suggests that move analysis should be taught to second language learners (Crossley, 2007) because teaching these moves helps them produce better texts that meet readers' expectations. Presenting students with model texts is meant to expose them to a model of how "good writers organize, develop and express their ideas" (Smagorinsky, 1992, p. 162). This exposure to model texts is particularly true in genre writing classes for which a text consists of different moves (e.g., sections or parts of a text) that need to be taught to understand the communicative purpose of that text (Osman, 2004). However, the role of teachers is then important in drawing students' attention (noticing) to these moves in model texts and in scaffolding production of discourse moves in students' writing. In addition, training students to give each other useful feedback is of great significance.

SELECTION AND NOTICING OF MODEL TEXTS:

Selecting models is essential to making the genre writing class more effective. Thus, L2 writing instructors need to be "analytical and critical readers" (Stolarek, 1994, p. 170) to pick model texts that meet their students' learning needs. To ensure the appropriate selection of model texts, Stolarek

suggests that writing instructors should endeavor to "develop an awareness of the linguistic features which define a particular form of writing, and to select models which present those features in a manner which is most accessible to students" (1994, p. 170). In other words, the models to be chosen should match the features the instructor wants to focus on in the class, whether these features are linguistic or rhetorical. Smagorinsky (1992) found that models that concentrated on one or two writing features were more successful than those that targeted all writing features. Along with Stolarek's (1994) and Smagorinsky's (1992) arguments, Charney and Carlson add that when writers pay attention to elements in the model texts they read, they are potentially able to compose "reliable new structures" (1995, p. 114).

Noticing occurs when students are aware of specific features (words, structures, and discourse elements) of a text, what these features mean, and how they are used. For students to select the appropriate components in their writing, they must first notice these features in the models presented to them. Schmidt states that "what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning." (1995, p. 20).

In the following section, we describe a graduate-level writing course that emphasized the use of model texts and noticing strategies to develop student writing. We present examples of the modeling and noticing activities conducted in the course, and we provide evidence that these course activities were significant contributors to improvement in student writing. There were two central questions that guided the development of this course. Firstly, how can components of academic writing in model texts be made salient to students? And, secondly, can frequent and intentional use of modeling texts in a writing course lead to an improvement in student writing?

GENRE-BASED WRITING COURSE

A total of twelve international graduate students (Saudi Arabia, Libya, Bangladesh, Columbia, and China) enrolled in an academic writing course for master's and Ph.D. students as part of their coursework in their respective graduate programs at a large research university in the northwest US. Eight participants were pursuing their doctoral degrees at the institution while seven were completing their master`s. The course instructor opened enrollment to students in graduate programs from across the College of Education; thus, students came from subtly different disciplines and genres of writing within Education. Additionally, participants were at different stages in the writing of their dissertations and theses. The course instructor introduced the other members of the research team (both of whom participated in the course as part of an internship) and asked if some of their writing for the course could be used for research purposes. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for exempt research was granted to the research team by the university.

The purpose of the writing course was twofold: (1) to emphasize writing in specific genres (publications and theses) and (2) to provide logistical space for students to write. The professor of the class worked collaboratively with the two interns (the co-authors of this paper). They met every week to talk about the class and share ideas and activities. The professor and the interns created activities that revolved around literature review moves, method moves, results moves, and discussion moves that form the specific writing genre within students' academic disciplines. The focus was on paragraph development and organization, style and mechanics, and paraphrasing and citing. To determine the students' academic writing needs in this academic writing course, the students reflected on the writing components that were a challenge for them in the first week of the semester so that the professor could focus on them. The students agreed on paragraph development and organization, paraphrasing and citing, and mechanics and style as the main components. The graduate students were taught these

moves through modeling texts and feedback training. Since the students were either pursuing their masters or PhDs, the one activity that all had in common was the literature review.

In the current paper, we situated the academic writing course in a real educational context; collaborated between researchers and practitioners; and worked within five principles that evolved through multiple repetitions of various activities (Anderson & Shattuck 2012). We collaborated, discussed, refined, and then checked to see if we were achieving our goals. Feedback from the interns was valuable for providing perspective on the course because one intern observed the course while the other intern was an enrolled student in the course.

The focus of writing samples was on the literature review related to a topic in the student's field of study. We developed various activities focused on written models of peer-reviewed published texts, student-produced texts in completed theses and dissertations, and texts from book chapters. The principles through which we organized the course were the following: (1) student input in the choice of models. (2) A variety of different types of models, (3) a variety of different types of noticing activities, (4) peer and instructor feedback with modeling, and (5) statements of general goals and specific writing objectives with progress statements half-way through the course. We used the narratives in students' reflection papers to provide evidence that we were meeting our goals and students' objectives, articulated at the beginning of the semester.

DESIGN-BASED PRINCIPLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE

STUDENT INPUT IN THE CHOICE OF MODELS. Students chose texts from their disciplines to include in the course readings. Selecting course articles / readings put an additional responsibility on the professor who had to read texts sometimes out of his discipline or area of expertise. The focus was on selecting writing models and looking at specific course variables: paragraph development and organization, paraphrasing and citation, and mechanics. Model texts were either selected by an assigned group of two-three students (by discipline), or the choice of model text was done by the professor with input from students. Because of the design of the course, most model texts were selected by the students. In some cases, students asked explicitly to look at the written models in the professor's own publications. Providing students with examining different model texts allowed them insight into the writing process – these were like chats with the author. Texts were made available to the students in the course wiki, and students were expected to have read the entire text before the next class. Because the professor would have to teach from the text, he required students to supply him with the text several weeks in advance so that he could skim the text to ensure that it would be a good fit for the course. Students typically had two or three different texts they were considering for the class to read. Together, students and the professor then decided on the most appropriate text for the group (given that students came from different disciplines). The professor asked students to provide texts influential to their own academic work, and he asked that the texts be peer-reviewed in journals or edited volumes. It was the responsibility of the assigned student group to make the texts available to the class. One of the class's activities was that the students had to read the article the students selected (*student input in the choice of models*). The article entitled: *Improving the Effectiveness of Peer Feedback for Learning (Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010)* is one of the articles students selected to read in class.

A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF MODELS. The design team selected a variety of academic texts to model. As already mentioned, texts were chosen by students from published materials in the students' (varied) disciplines, which provided different academic genres and research paradigms from which to work. Encouraging students to analyze, question, and compare a variety of genres augments students` understanding of the models at hand. This analytical approach assists them in being more aware of genre

conventions they use in class. In addition to student-selected texts, the professor brought in manuscripts written by his graduate students. The rationale behind graduate-student written models was that these would likely be more accessible to other graduate students (which may or may not have been borne out in the data). Students tended to find the graduate student models, particularly those that reflected early drafts, to be examples of what "not to do". It is unlikely that these weaker models of academic writing were helpful. However, graduate student writing examples also included the professor's comments and critique. The purpose of providing these was to model how to give a substantive, constructive review. Students worked in groups to provide comments to a sample graduate student excerpt (usually a few pages or, in some cases, a section). They compared their comments to the professor's comments, and class discussion revolved around what kind of comments were useful. This noticing activity aimed to draw students' attention to the appropriate feedback they can give. This was all in preparation for peer review of classmates' written work.

We sought to expose students to a large number of model academic texts to highlight quality writing elements. We based this on the principle of *noticing* (Cross, 2002) such that the graduate students might connect specific linguistic, lexical, and rhetorical forms to their function in the text. Following Cross (2002), we posited that "the more frequent an item, the greater number of opportunities for noticing exist" (p. 2). Thus, providing learners with many different quality models could have helped the students notice how various linguistic, lexical and rhetorical features were used in other quality models. Our hope was to expand, not limit, students' repertoire of elements and avoid students feeling the need to imitate the text. According to Charney and Carlson, "any single model may not be very useful when compared to a variety of models that better represent the range of acceptable variation" (1995, p. 91).

A VARIETY OF NOTICING ACTIVITIES. The design team hypothesized that the most valuable use of model texts involved highlighting specific features of designated texts. Thus, the professor and design team crafted noticing activities specifically around the primary course principles for each model text. The process was an organic and responsive one. For example, students would read the assigned text with an eye for cohesive devices, organization, citation style, terminology definitions, tense, voice, or any other focus from the previous week. Students would read the text and look for these specific features. Then, in the following week, the professor would prepare specific noticing activities with the text. To augment students' understanding of paragraph unity, for example, in class, the professor took out parts of the article and asked students to fill in the missing parts such as the topic sentence, conclusion, implication, etc. Then, students had to work in groups of three to finish all the activities. The students had to discuss their choices while they were working on organizing the missing parts of the article. The students had to compare what they synthesized to the original article. Then, the students reflected on how the author of the article organized his article in a way that made it unified. The students worked through questions such as: *does the article state the main idea clearly? Do paragraphs have clear topic sentences? How does the author logically order his paragraphs?* The goal of this reflection was to promote noticing.

Another noticing activity that the students did in class was to paraphrase different sentences that were taken from the articles the students chose from their fields of study. The students read through the paraphrased sentences, compared them to the original text, and answered different questions as fully as possible to help their group member to revise his/her paraphrase. These questions were related to paraphrasing such as: does your peer's writing maintain the main idea of the original text? Is there any critical information that your peer deleted in the paraphrased sentences? Which parts of the paraphrased sentences are particularly well written? The purpose of such questions was to focus students' attention on the basic elements of paraphrasing. A variety of activities were used to guide students and help them correctly use mechanics and style. For instance, in the peer-reviewed, discipline-specific articles that students found for the course, they were asked to underline or highlight structures,

modals, tenses, etc. As mentioned previously, the purpose of highlighting is to make these features salient to students. The professor also used the WordSmith tool (software used by linguists to analyze language patterns such as words, etc.) to walk the students through the words that different articles used.

PEER AND INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK WITH MODELING. As already mentioned, one purpose of the graduate student model texts was also to provide models of peer feedback. Because most students in the course were doctoral students, this provided an opportunity to incorporate faculty roles as peer reviewers themselves (the service component of a faculty position). The course designers also talked about professional discourse and how to give a constructive review. The goal was to provide students with models on many different levels, including how to "behave" or talk to others in the field. One principle of the course was that faculty should model how to talk professionally when providing feedback on graduate student work.

The interns worked on developing peer review training materials. They worked on peer review as a progression through levels of feedback: clarifying the writer's intentions, identifying the source of problems, explaining the nature of problems, and making specific suggestions (Min,2005). The idea was that the higher the level of peer review, the greater the professional expertise required. Students reflected on the level at which they were most qualified to provide peer feedback. In most cases, students opted for a level of feedback around questioning (as opposed to statements for improvement).

STATEMENTS OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES. The course began with a needs assessment and statements of individual goals and objectives. Goals were written as big picture statements, and objectives were written as measurable and discrete. Students posted their goal and objective statements in the course wiki. Course participants revisited the objectives halfway through the course, and students reflected on whether they were meeting their objectives. Students were asked to be specific in how they measured their progress. Finally, at the end of the course, students were asked to revisit their objectives again. We hoped that students could articulate the gap between their current writing and where they wanted to be by the end of the course.

COURSE OUTCOMES

For the current paper, we present four excerpts from two students enrolled in the course to illustrate the impact of the course on paragraph development and organization as well as transition words and connectors. Nona was a student in a Special Education master's program. She was working on her literature review when enrolled in the academic writing course. Early in the semester, Nona wrote the following:

> The theoretical frame on autism spectrum disorder explains the bi-directional relationship between the memory and the self in Autism spectrum disorder. It is argued that children with Autism spectrum disorder have got a diminished psychological self-knowledge due diagnostic social and communication impairments along with intact physical self-knowledge. Individuals with Autism spectrum disorder show impaired autobiographical episodic memory or a reduced self-reference effect.

In relation to paragraph development and organization, this excerpt represents the student's writing early in the course. Nona started the paragraph with a clear topic sentence. After the controlling idea, she introduces three new concepts (*diminished psychological self-knowledge*, *diagnostic social and communication impairments*, and *physical self-knowledge*) without explaining how they relate to *bi-directional relationship*. There is no clear unity between *memory, self,* and these additional terms. The

notion of a "bi-directional relationship" is the key concept, but this is never explained – neither in a typical child nor in a child with autism. Readers are left wondering how any of these concepts are related to each other.

By the end of the course, Nona demonstrates a more developed understanding of paragraph unity, as seen in the progression of ideas from the excerpt below, taken from a paper at the end of the course.

> Children with ASD experience difficulties in most of the activities of daily living more than children with other disabilities. Two studies (Cardon, Wilcox, & Campbell, 2011; Kling, Campbell, & Wilcox, 2010) specially investigated the issue of problematic activities and their AT solutions in children with ASD and other disabilities. Cardon and colleagues identified bathing time, morning routine, evening routine, mealtime, and play as the most problematic activities among children with ASD as identified by caregivers (Cardon et al., 2011).

Examining Nona's second writing excerpt, Nona has somewhat developed a basic understanding of paragraph unity. The central idea of the paragraph illustrated in this sentence: *Children with ASD experience difficulties in most of the activities of daily living more than children with other disabilities*. In the following sentence, *Two studies (Cardon, Wilcox, & Campbell, 2011; Kling, Campbell, & Wilcox, 2010) specially investigated the issue of problematic activities*, the writer showed how research examined some problematic activities. Then, in the following sentence, she lists some problematic activities introduced in the previous sentence. All these sentences are clearly centered around the same controlling idea about problems with daily living activities for children with ASD. This logical progression of ideas makes the whole paragraph well unified.

Wawa was a native speaker of Chinese, working towards the defense of the prelim exam. Early in the semester, Wawa wrote the following:

> Many second language acquisition researchers have believed that for second language learners, interaction in the classroom is very important to their communicative competence development (Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, 1984). Peer feedback on writing is a socially constructed activity (Nelson &Carson, 1994). Vygotsky argues that cognitive development results from social interaction (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994), learning is not an individual activity, but rather an activity mediated by social interaction (Vygotsky, 1986; Zhu, 1995)

Although Wawa used some transition words, some of her sentences were left without clear transition words. For example, there is no logical connection between the first sentence and the second sentence. The writer highlights the importance of "interaction" in developing students' "communicative competence," while the following sentence focuses on peer feedback as "a socially constructed activity." The two sentences are not quite related. Adding a transition word would make the two sentences clearer.

By the end of the course, there is a clear progression of ideas supported by the use of transition words and connectors (coordinating and subordinating conjunctions) in Wawa's writing. The use of *these modifications* helps the reader see the connection to the following sentences. The writer talks about learners' ability to modify their writing to their peers' feedback and the other sentence where the writer

shows what these mortifications might include. The use of *and* further enhances the meaning of the sentence that follows as it shows an additional relationship between the two sentences. Thus, the whole paragraph is coherent. Below is Wawa's second writing excerpt.

> Leaners modify their writing according to their peer's feedback. These modifications indicate that peer feedback activities can give students opportunities to review their writing with the eyes of another (Zamel, 1982), and allow writers to revise their writing to meet the needs of their audience.

Eventually, reading the students' reflections, students showed their appreciation of model texts used in class in improving their writing. In one of the student's reflections, she wrote, "Personally, I found it really beneficial to analyze many model articles to learn from the authors how to write and organize my paper." Additionally, another student mentioned "For the transition word, "however, so, in short, but, because, in addition…" they are all good examples that show me how to think about the transition between sentence or paragraph," while another student commented "It is proved in the class today, that a good research paper can be a good guide for graduate students to understand all requirements of their academic writing. I can assume that everyone knows all grammatical tools, specific patterns of writing good sentence and paragraph, and importantly, each element of the dissertation at the end of the semester."

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines five design-based principles that likely promoted graduate student writing. Evidence from writing samples taken at the beginning and the end of the semester-long course indicate that these instructional principles positively impacted student writing. Results from the description of this genre-based writing course suggest that multiple and varied academic text models combined with student input on the choice of models is a powerful provision of student control over course content. A vital role of the instructor was to provide multiple noticing activities during class. Students measured their progress (at the midterm and final) against their own general writing goals and specific writing objectives. Exposing international graduate students to varying quality models can augment their understanding of the genre at hand. When they are allowed analyze different quality models, international learners can expand or generalize their knowledge to be more independent writers in new and varied contexts (Charney & Carlson, 1995). Providing students with models and offering the opportunity to select models that address the language features for which students struggle, draws students' attention (noticing) to these features through different model-based activities, and provides students a firm foundation in academic writing.

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