

Using Model Essays to Create Good Writers

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Abstract Teachers need to be able to write academic articles to further their professional development. This chapter demonstrates how in-service teachers in a in-service programme in the Sultanate of Oman were helped to improve their academic writing skills by analysing model essays. This chapter will show the procedure that was used in several language improvement classes for teachers. In these classes, the teachers were given skeleton plans, model essays, analysis sheets for the essays and feedback to help them improve their academic essays. Results on the use of these materials are given for one group of teachers and the findings are discussed and suggestions made for the future.

1 Introduction

The idea of using model essays to improve novice writers own writing abilities and style can be traced back to antiquity according to Smagorinsky (1992). In our own time recognition that the skills needed to be a good writer are acquired from reading is acknowledged by Krashen (1984) who claims that ‘The ability to write is hypothesized to be the result of reading’ (p. 23). Spack (2001) backs up this view by stating that ‘to become better writers, then, students need to become better readers’ (p. 101).

The use of model essays to teach writing is not confined to the EFL classroom, but according to Bagheri and Zare (2009) is commonly used by teachers instructing native English speakers in writing classes. This view is supported by Abbuhl (2011) who reports that models are commonly used in both L1 and L2 classes to assist novice writers. At the very least most writing teachers would probably agree that

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learning writers must be given the opportunity to study examples of the genre they are trying to write in and so for this reason Hillocks (1986: 154) states that ‘the writer must be familiar with examples of the type and know the parts of the type and their relationships’. Bagheri and Zare (2009) see the use of model essays as an example of the product approach to essay writing which according to Hedge (2000) has its roots in the teaching of rhetorics. Hirvela (2004) quoting Greene (1993: 34) points out that reading plays an important part in the writing class ‘because we believe that students can learn about writing through imitating models of well wrought prose’.

The product approach to teaching writing has fallen out of favour and so too has the use of models. Abbuhl (2011) points out that the practice is not without its critics; especially the way they were used in the 1960’s when students were encouraged to slavishly imitate the model essays they were given. The main charge against their use, according to writers like Zamel (1983), is that students were generally not informed of the processes involved in their production and that this encouraged mindless imitation, which she links to the influence of audio-lingual methodology which saw writing as a habit-formed skill (Zamel 2001).

Another objection voiced by Hirvela (2004) is that in a second language context ‘confusion may result from students juxtaposing their native language schema about written texts against what they are learning from target language models’ (p. 128). Today the approach is less to encourage passive imitation but rather to emphasize the importance of studying different genres (Swales 1990). This view on the importance of genre is supported by Crinon and Legros (2002) who claim that it helps the student writer to create a mental model of the genre, while Macbeth (2010) claims that their use can alleviate the apprehension associated with learning to write a new genre. Further support for their application in writing classes is provided by Hyland (2004) who advocates their use for raising the visibility of rhetorical conventions. While academics and teachers may be divided in their opinion of the usefulness of models to teach writing, it would appear that students are more enthusiastic in their support for this approach. A quick search on ‘model essays’ in Google will come up with thousands of sites, some free and some commercial, where students can find examples of essays in many different genres. Of course, many of these are unfortunately run by unscrupulous people out to make money even if they know that some if not many of these essays will be copied and submitted as the students’ own work and this highlights one of the great risks of the use of the ‘model essay’, which is that it encourages plagiarism.

Despite these dangers, more reputable authors, like Ann Strauch (1997), while following a process approach to writing, warn of the dangers of excluding organizational patterns and believe that instructors must help their students ‘by making basic organizational patterns explicit’ (p. 8) and this is done by including short models. Reid’s (1994) ‘The Process of Paragraph Writing’ has a similar approach.

An important feature of the use of models in writing classes now is their application in the analysis of texts. According to Bagheri and Zare (2009: 3) by ‘analyzing the text of model essays, L2 writers become aware of how particular grammatical features are used in authentic discourse contexts’. Abbuhl (2011: 2)

believes that this analysis fits in with the genre-based approach to writing instruction and that by analysing texts for their ‘organizational, lexico-grammatical, and rhetorical features, students are sensitized to the genre’s social context’.

In this chapter, I will tell my story about my experience of using model essays on in-service courses with teachers. I will explain how and why I used model essays and the problems I and my colleagues encountered and how I tried to solve these issues and finally, I will give results on my work with the class. I will then discuss the findings and give some ideas about future plans for work in this area.

2 My Story

I have called this section ‘My Story’, because here I will explain how I came to use model essays with teachers on some of the in-service teacher courses that are taught in the training centre in North Batinah. I am the Regional Teacher and Adviser at the Teacher Training Centre in North Batinah Governate in the Sultanate of Oman. This chapter is based on the teaching of academic writing on a language improvement course for teachers. The materials used on this course were designed and prepared with the help of my colleagues who teach similar courses in the training centre.

2.1 Background to the Study

It all began when the English trainers at the Sohar Training Centre were asked by the Central Training Department in Muscat in 2010 to run language development courses for teachers in the North Batinah region. As part of the courses we were asked to conduct academic writing seminars on four different topics, all of which were connected with the professional life of a teacher. The topics were:

- What makes a good teacher?
- A good language learner. Are you one?
- Managing learners. Is it easy?
- Continuing Professional Development: What can I do to develop my practice?

After we started to teach the seminars we soon realized that we had several problems. First, our teachers freely acknowledged that they did not like writing and we soon discovered that one reason for this was because they had little idea on how to organize an academic essay. Their essays besides from being in most cases organizational disasters were also full of language mistakes. Our first approach had been to follow a process method whereby we first of all gave the teachers the title and then did a brainstorm and asked them to construct a plan in groups and then write a draft which we corrected and returned for them to rewrite. The problem with this approach is that the teachers had in most cases no idea of the genre of an academic essay. It is

true that we were conducting reading seminars on articles from professional journals, but these articles were far longer than what we required from them in these essays and they also were generally based on research findings. The participants constantly asked us to provide them with a model and after some deliberation we decided to do so. As we had no bank of essays on the topics we agreed that we would have to write our own. While reading, as Krashen (1984) points out, is important in preparing writers according to Smagorinsky's (1992) study 'reading models alone is insufficient to improve writing' (p. 173). There was also an additional problem here in that we discovered that many of our teachers have not developed the reading habit and do not read extensively which Eskey and Grabe (1988) see as important because it envelops the reader in the written form of the language, which Krashen (1984) sees as essential to learning the discourse rules for writing. Abbuhl (2011: 2) also provides support for the view that reading models alone is not sufficient and believes the teacher must 'include consciousness-raising activities to draw learners' attention to the target rhetorical features'. Therefore, if we were to use models we decided the participants had to do more than just read them.

When we started the courses we were conscious of some of the dangers of using models, the chief one being the risk of teachers slavishly imitating the essays, which was mentioned by Zamel (2001), Hyland (2004) and Hirvela (2004). One way we tried to minimize this was to follow advice given in an article published on line by Texas A and M University (2008) and use models for all four essays. This did not strictly follow the article's suggestion which was that the students should be offered multiple samples, because we felt we did not have time to either prepare or study more than one example for each essay. However, we believe that by providing them with examples for each essay we were able to reduce the chances of unthinking imitation.

2.2 The Materials

We gradually developed our materials over the three times we have taught the courses. During the first course we developed the skeleton plans, in the second course the model essays and the analysis sheets, and in the final course a feedback sheet for the essays which the participants could use for self-assessment. Examples for all of these for the first essay can be found in the Appendices: Skeleton Plan (Appendix I), Model Essay (Appendix II). Analysis sheet for model essay (Appendix III) and finally the feedback sheet (Appendix IV).

2.3 The Courses

Three years ago, the English Trainers started to teach several English Language Courses for Teachers (ELCT). On these courses, we were supposed to teach the

teachers the language skills and as a part of the course we had to develop the teachers' writing skills. In the course outline it stated that that the participants should write essays on the four different titles mentioned above.

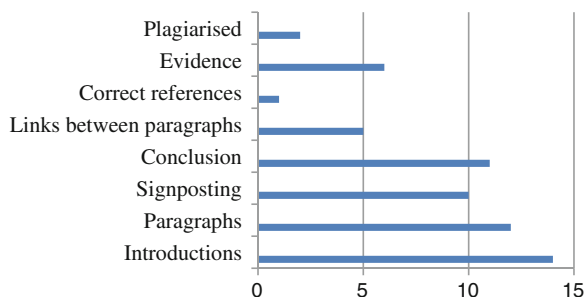
In 2010, all the trainers in our centre found that we faced problems in teaching our students the different aspects of writing like paragraphing, signposting, topic sentences, providing supporting details and using evidence, and referencing.etc. In fact we had to teach them all the basic features used in academic writing. Though we tried to use different materials to explain the writing aspects, their writing still did not improve.

The skeleton plans were first used in the Intermediate Language Course in 2010 and the model essays in the Intermediate Language Course in 2011. The feedback sheets were developed for the Cycle Two course in 2012. The results for both the Intermediate English Language Course in 2011 and the New English Teachers' Course in 2011–2012 were generally very positive with the participants making noticeable improvements over the course periods in the organization of their texts. As we were not intending to do formal research on the topic during the first three courses I did not keep detailed notes on the essays from these courses and so I will describe in some detail results for the Cycle Two course and in particular the changes that I noticed between the first and second drafts of the first essay on 'What makes a good teacher?'

This course began on the 19th of March, 2012 with 15 Cycle Two teachers, 6 males and 9 females, from the Suweiq region. In the second session, I asked the participants to brainstorm their ideas on 'What makes a good teacher?' I then presented them with the skeleton plan (See Appendix I) and asked them to prepare it for the next day. Next they read each other's plans and offered advice. For the next session I asked them to write the essay as a first draft, which I then collected. After examining the essays I gathered the following information about them, which can be seen in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of these participants had already grasped the basic principle of essay organization in that 12 of the 14 divided their essays into paragraphs. Unfortunately, in two cases the essays were largely plagiarised. All had introductions, and all but one a conclusion. In the case of the two plagiarised essays, the introductions were the only part that was in their own words. In their

Fig. 1 'What makes a good teacher?' First draft



introductions, 10 signposted what they would do in the essay, but only 6 of these reflected that signposting in their paragraphs. However, in their conclusions only 8 gave their own opinions, while the remaining three just summarised what they had already said. It is in the area of providing evidence to support their arguments that the essays were weakest. As can be seen from the table only six had any evidence to support their views and of these 6 only three had evidence from the literature. Of the three who had referred to the literature only one had correct references.

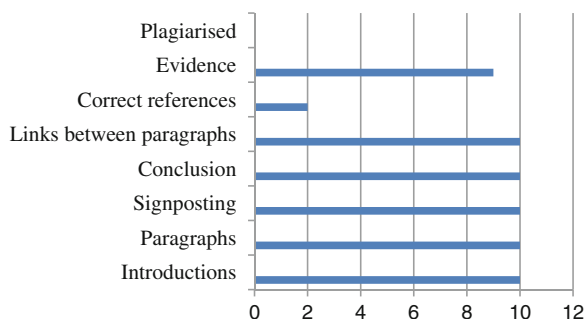
After I returned the essays in the fourth session I handed out the model essay on ‘What makes a good teacher?’ (See Appendix II) and the sheet for analysing the essay (See Appendix III). The participants then read the essays and worked on the analysis, after which we discussed it in a plenary session. In their groups, they then discussed how they could improve their essays and they were then asked to redraft their own essays for the next session, which was to be held the following week, so they had over a week to prepare.

In the next session I collected the essays which I examined and made notes on the feedback sheet, which I used for the first time (See Appendix IV). The results of the second draft are shown in Fig. 2.

As can be seen from Fig. 2, there is a general improvement in those who resubmitted their essays. Unfortunately, four teachers were absent that day and never handed in their redrafted essays. All of the teachers now signposted what they would do in their essays in the introduction and more important all of them reflected this in their paragraphs. This shows a great improvement in organization. In addition the coherence of the essays was greatly improved by all having links between the paragraphs, though in some cases these were merely done by ordinal numbers, but most had some link between the last sentence of the previous paragraph and the first sentence of the next paragraph. For example teacher 4’s second paragraph was on ‘knowledge of the subject’ and the third paragraph began with ‘Good knowledge is not enough but the teacher must also ...’.

Though most of the teachers had still not grasped how to do correct referencing, nine of them did use evidence to support their arguments, and seven of these used evidence from literature as well as from their own experience. All of the teachers gave their own opinions in the final concluding paragraph rather than just summarising what they had already written about. A completed example of the feedback given to the participants can be found in Appendix V.

Fig. 2 ‘What makes a good teacher?’ Second Draft



3 Discussion

I believe that my story clearly shows that the use of the model essays had a positive effect on the teachers' own writing. The story shows that participants on the course made considerable improvements in the organization of their essays. In particular they all seemed to have been able to write in paragraphs at the end and these paragraphs were themselves more internally organized around one major theme. In addition, the teachers improved their signposting of the essays in their introductory paragraphs and they then reflected this signposting in their subsequent paragraphs. Evidence of greater coherence in the essays is provided by the improved ability to link paragraphs.

However, the participants still had some problems especially with providing evidence to support their views. While, most were able in redrafted essays to provide evidence from experience, few gave any evidence from literature, and those who did supply literature references were unable to do this correctly. Perhaps this is another issue and all the trainers believe that this requires extra work on referencing which was not done on these courses. Another reason for this lack of references from literature may have been that the teachers did not have sufficient resources and we need to look into how we can help them find sources to back up their ideas. This could be done by identifying a collection of suitable books and journals and identifying key words for internet searches.

In this chapter nothing has been said regarding the language accuracy of the essays and the research merely concentrated on organizational features. However, there is evidence, according to Abbuhl (2011: 2) to show that novice writers also benefit in their 'discrete elements of language' by using models. We did not collect data on this, but it is worth noting that improved organization makes the identification of language mistakes easier.

4 Future Plans

The discussion has identified where we should go next with this research. In our next courses where the trainers will teach academic writing we need to adopt a far more rigorous approach to the collection of data. We also need to examine whether the use of the models has any impact on language accuracy as well as organization. We should also collect data on the participants' own views on the effectiveness of the models on their writing.

A.1 Appendix I

A.1.1 *What Makes a Good Teacher?*

Make sure that you divide your essay into

_____.

First Paragraph: _____

Make sure you introduce the topic in the _____ sentence. Be specific.

Make sure you signpost what you are going to say in the rest of the essay. That is say what aspects of a teacher you are going to write about.

Aspects you will write about (Choose about 4):

Second Paragraph: What aspect of a good teacher will you write about here:

What evidence will you use to support your argument? (Evidence can be from experience or literature)

Third Paragraph: What aspect of a good teacher will you write about here:

What evidence will you use to support your argument? (Evidence can be from experience or literature)

Fourth Paragraph: What aspect of a good teacher will you write about here:

What evidence will you use to support your argument? (Evidence can be from experience or literature)

Fifth Paragraph: What aspect of a good teacher will you write about here:

What evidence will you use to support your argument? (Evidence can be from experience or literature)

Fifth Paragraph: _____

Sum up your argument. Try to relate it to the first paragraph.

References: If you have mentioned any books you MUST list them in your references.

Author's Surname, Initial. (Date of publication). Title of Book. Place of Publication Publisher.
Nunan, D. (2000) *Language Teaching Methodology*. Harlow: Longman.

A.2 Appendix II

A.2.1 *What Makes a Good Teacher?*

When I think of the qualities that make a good teacher, I remember Miss Williams, my Grade 6 teacher. Though tiny, most of boys in the all male class towered above her; Miss Williams kept control over us by the force of her personality and her well planned, interesting and creative lessons. Before child centred learning became a fashionable buzz word, Miss Williams practised it and her classroom management skills ensured that we did pair work and group work as well as well paced more traditional whole class activities. Most important of all I think each boy felt that Miss Williams cared that we learnt. Each of these qualities: a caring personality, good management skills, focusing on the learner, and the use of a variety of techniques are the hallmarks of a good teacher. I will examine each one in more detail.

First, teachers need to care for their pupils. Miss Williams, like all good teachers, knew our names quickly and in this way showed that she cared for us. Knowing the names also helped her to keep control of the class. Vale and Feunteun (1995) point out that the caring teacher needs to play the role of parent, teacher, friend, motivator, co-ordinator and organizer as well as being good at his or her subject. The good caring teacher will know his or her pupils and so will be more able to meet any special needs any pupil may have and plan the lessons so that he or she meets these needs.

That is one reason why planning lessons in advance is so important. Scrivener (2005) believes that thinking about your lessons is the most important stage of this, so that you are clear about what your aims are and can plan the lesson in logical steps. Vale and Feunton (1995) agree and point out that it is important to have a variety of teaching techniques so that you can provide different learning styles for your pupils, because not all learning styles will suit all pupils. Miss Williams certainly did that for us. I remember her bringing in realia, getting us to do role plays and drama activities and using songs and poetry. She also took us on trips outside the school.

Today, from my own experience as a teacher, I see that many teachers prefer a more child centred approach to teaching. This gives students many more opportunities to work together and in TEFL to practice the language with each other. Teachers who use pair work and group work give students, as Nunan (2000) points out, more time to use the target language. Nunan also believes that such activities give students an opportunity to collaborate with each other and this improves the classroom atmosphere.

To control different types of classroom interaction the teacher must have good management skills. The good teacher will give clear instructions and will stage these and make sure that students can repeat them before starting a task. Ur (1991) states that research on students' opinions about teachers shows that 'learners see the ability to explain things well as one of the most important qualities of a good teacher' (16). Good classroom management in my experience is linked to good planning and a good plan will always have a variety of activities and classroom interaction patterns.

It is often said that ‘good teachers are born not made’, but this is really a myth for the good teacher needs to learn the skills of planning, classroom management and different teaching techniques. Enthusiasm for the job is important, but without careful preparation and thinking about the aims of the lesson and how to involve the students and assist their learning it is doubtful that any teacher will pass the test of ‘being a good teacher’ and be remembered by her pupils as a good teacher as Miss Williams is remembered by me fifty years on as my model of a good teacher.

A.3 Appendix III

A.3.1 *What Makes a Good Teacher?*

In your groups compare what you found out about the model essay then make brief notes.

Paragraph One. How does the writer introduce the topic?

How does he signpost the rest of the essay?

Paragraph 2. What does the writer discuss here?

What evidence does he give to support his argument?

Paragraph 3. What aspect of a good teacher does the writer discuss here?

How does the writer link this paragraph with the last one?

What evidence does he give to support his argument?

Paragraph 4. What aspect of the good teacher does the writer talk about here?

Where does his evidence come from?

Paragraph 5. What aspect of the good teacher does the writer mention here?

What examples does he give?

Paragraph 6. How does the writer conclude his essay?

How does the writer link the introduction and the conclusion?

References: Are these correctly done?

A.4 Appendix IV

A.4.1 *What Makes a Good Teacher?*

Name:

Analysis of essay.

Paragraph One. How you introduced the topic:

How you signposted the rest of the essay?

Paragraph 2. Your theme here is

Your evidence to support your argument.

Paragraph 3. Your theme here is

Your link to the last paragraph:

Your evidence to support your argument.

Paragraph 4. Your theme here is:

Your link to the last paragraph:

Your evidence to support your argument:

Paragraph 5. Your theme here is:

Your link to the last paragraph:

Your evidence to support your argument:

Paragraph 6. Your theme here is:

Your link to the last paragraph or to other paragraphs if it is the conclusion:

References: Are these correctly done?

A.5 Appendix V

A.5.1 *What Makes a Good Teacher?*

Name: Teacher 3.

Analysis of essay.

Paragraph One. How you introduced the topic: You state that you will give your own views about what makes a good teacher and will take evidence from both your experience and literature.

How you signposted the rest of the essay? You say that you will discuss only four reasons and will give subtitles to them. You do not say what they will be.

Paragraph 2. Your theme here is: Heading: A good teacher. Really part of the introduction as you say you will discuss four reasons and say why you chose them because they are the ones that make a good relationship between teacher and student.

Your evidence to support your argument. Not really needed here. Just your opinion.

Paragraph 3. Your theme here is The teacher building his own activities. (A heading)

Your link to the last paragraph: No real link.

Your evidence to support your argument. You give examples from your own experience and link this to the writings of Halliwell.

Paragraph 4. Your theme here is: A good teacher designs activities based on learners needs and abilities.

Your link to the last paragraph: Your main link is the use of first, second etc.

Your evidence to support your argument: Once again you have used your own experience as a teacher of 16 years and have supported this with views from Baker and Halliwell. You need to comment more on literature references.

Paragraph 5. Your theme here is: Experience more important than qualifications.

Your link to the last paragraph: The link is the use of ordinal numbers.

Your evidence to support your argument: Strong personal views backed up with quotation from Baker.

Paragraph 6. Your theme here is: Good atmosphere in the classroom.

Your link to the last paragraph: You use the ordinal and though you don't explicitly state it there is a link to your second paragraph because atmosphere is so important. Once again backed up by Baker.

Paragraph 7. Conclusion. Here you very strongly express your own views and say what can interfere with a good teacher.

Link: To sum up.

References: Are these correctly done? Yes. This is well done apart from According to linked to another verb.

General Comment: This shows greater organization than the first draft.

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