Teachers’ practices in EAP writing instruction: Use of models and modeling

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**Abstract**

This paper presents findings from an exploratory study into the practices of teachers of EAP writing. Its aim was to learn about how writing instruction is organised, the kinds of instructional strategies teachers employ, and how they account for their choices. Data were collected from seven experienced practitioners in five tertiary institutions over 10–12 class hours through observations supported by post-lesson interviews and analysis of teaching materials and course documents. Findings revealed repeated use of a number of instructional strategies that can be termed “modeling”. Teachers presented flawed or exemplary text products for analysis and discussion, focused on the processes involved in creating a particular text by demonstrating and discussing cognitive processes with the class, led whole-class collaborations that produced jointly constructed texts, and facilitated cooperative pair or group composing and editing activities. Their practices blended textual, cognitive, and interactional components in order to advance students’ skill across a range of academic text types. The study highlights the importance and value of explicit instructional conversations and social interactions that blend planned and responsive teaching to generate learning opportunities in the L2 writing classroom. Possibilities for further investigations in this under-researched area are suggested.

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**1. Introduction**

With English currently the dominant language of research and scholarship in a range of academic disciplines, many undergraduates and postgraduates from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) choose to study in English-speaking countries as international or local students (Hinkel, 2002; Hyland, 2013). Becoming proficient writers of the types of academic texts required for their disciplinary studies is a demanding goal for most of these students: discourses are complex and often different from those in their home cultures, shortcomings in their written texts are all too clearly visible to assessors, and competence is essential for academic success (Cumming, 2006; Leki, 2003; Silva, 1997). There is therefore a compelling need for teachers of writing courses in English for academic purposes (EAP) to have a better understanding of how instruction can assist students to achieve their goals.

Theory-based advice and information in this area is readily available and includes information about the benefits and limitations of process- and product-oriented approaches as well as about the need to include in the EAP writing curriculum awareness of the needs of the reader, disciplinary differences, and critical discourse analysis. Recent interest in social learning theories has highlighted the importance of “instructional conversations” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) that involve analysis of...
completed models, modeling writing processes, and scaffolding of learners’ attempts to construct their own texts. However, the very real dearth of empirical studies into how L2 writing is actually taught (with the exception of written corrective feedback) compared with the amount of scholarly and theory-based literature in this area has been noted (e.g. Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hinkel, 2011; Hyland, 2002; Kroll, 2003). The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate teachers’ practices through observations of classroom instruction and teacher interviews. It is hoped that findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge of the benefits of active student engagement through analysis and construction of models, of options for organising the EAP writing curriculum, and of influences on teachers’ instructional choices and priorities.

2. Literature review

This section reviews research-based and theoretical knowledge on topics relevant to the interests of the study: curriculum and instructional options for L2 and EAP writing instruction and the current influence of social learning theories and genre-based approaches.

2.1. Curriculum change in L2 and EAP writing

It is generally accepted that fundamental curriculum pivots for L2 writing instruction are the abilities and composing processes of writers, the writer–reader relationship, how language operates in specific genres and text types,1 and writing as a form of social practice (Cumming, 1995; Grabe & Kaplan, 1997; Hyland, 2002, 2007). Over the past fifty years the emphasis given to each of these has fluctuated, while at the same time there has been a general development and broadening of the curriculum so that in the current “post-process” (Matsuda, 2003) era, blends and hybrids of all four elements are common. In recent years, EAP writing instruction has been influenced by socio-cultural theories (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008), genre theory, and core elements of systemic functional linguistics. As a result, genre-based pedagogies are now commonly used in EAP (e.g. Coffin et al., 2003; Swales & Feak, 2012) and in L2 writing in general, particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Hinkel, 2011). This orientation places a stronger emphasis on explicit instruction and classroom interaction (both teacher–student and student–student) than in process-based pedagogies, and assigns a more active role to the teacher.

Benefits of genre-based approaches for the L2 writing teacher include ways of linking the four macro-skills with micro-units such as structures and functions, of highlighting conventional patterns of organisation, and of drawing attention to the communicative purpose of texts as examples of social practice in specific academic contexts. However, some scholars have critiqued the textual focus and normative basis of this type of instruction (e.g. Benesch, 2001; Lea & Street, 1998) with its tendency to view genres as fixed, clearly defined entities (Widdowson, 2003). With regard to EAP writing instruction, Lea and Street (1998) recommend that the conventional study skills (grammatical accuracy and sentence/paragraph level writing) and academic socialisation (disciplinary genres as social practice) emphasise subsumed into an EAP writing curriculum that includes discussion of neutrality, equity and change with regard to dominant academic discourses.

An issue of current debate is whether EAP writing instruction is more effective when linked to specific academic (ESAP) disciplines (e.g. Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bruce, 2011; Canobcsik-Williams, 2006; Hyland, 2002, 2007), or whether undergraduate writers need to first develop common-core, transferable (EGAP) writing abilities and knowledge of basic academic text types (e.g. Leki & Carson, 1994; Spack, 1988; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Although the value of disciplinary-specific instruction is now widely acknowledged, practical constraints often mean that EGAP courses are the only instructional option available.

However, there is general agreement among both teachers and scholars (e.g. Swales, 1990; Turner, 2004) of the need for all stakeholders to recognise that far from just providing remedial assistance for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, EAP instruction actually endeavors to develop knowledge and skill in a range of sophisticated literacies.

Recently published scholarly texts on L2 writing (e.g. Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Galbraith & Rijlaarsdam, 1999; Grabe & Kaplan, 1997; Hyland, 2002, 2003; Matsuda, 2003) advise that instruction needs to blend textual, cognitive and social dimensions, and that the curriculum needs to be conceptualised less simplistically than in terms of “process” or “product” (Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Matsuda, 2003). Cummins, Erösöy, and Cumming (2006) speculate that the exact combination of curriculum components might well be determined by course goals and students’ level of writing expertise, with grammar and lexis more likely to be emphasised in pre-university courses, and genre knowledge and critical thinking more prominent in-in-sessional undergraduate courses. Genre-based guides to L2 writing instruction (e.g. Grabe & Kaplan, 1997; Hyland, 2003, 2007) advise teachers to include a range of model exemplars (as well as a metalanguage with which to examine them), socially and cognitively oriented activities (e.g. text analysis and discussion, extensive guided and individual practice using text outlines, independent text construction tasks, and activities to raise awareness of the needs of the reader), and a range of feedback options. They advise also that teachers should continue to include attention to writing processes in their courses, especially those for less experienced writers.

1 Following Biber (1988), the term genres refers to texts with similar external characteristics e.g. poem, lecture, novel, and essay, while text types refers to texts with similar linguistic features regardless of genre e.g. process, description, cause–effect, problem–solution.
2.2. The influence of social learning theories

According to the educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), social activities and active involvement in the social world are as important for learning as acts of individual cognition. Socio-cultural theorists (e.g. Lantolf, 2000; van Lier, 1996; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) draw on the principles of Vygotsky to state that cognitive development in classroom learning is assisted by various kinds of discourse in which teachers and learners both actively construct understanding. Through communicative interactions, teachers assist learners by activating prior knowledge, eliciting, supporting, undertaking direct instruction or modeling, and encouraging them to revise or elaborate initial efforts (Donato, 2000). However, novices do not merely copy the models provided as part of this assistance: they learn by observing and create something new from what they take, so that in due course, socially mediated activities give way to individual self-regulation (Lantolf, 2000). Teacher-led instruction or collaborative peer interactions (Ashton-Hay & Pillay, 2010) can open up learning opportunities for individuals to progress within their “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), a term that describes what learners are able to achieve with assistance from a more capable source such as a teacher or a proficient peer.

The term “modeling” encompasses presentation of cognitive processes by the teacher, analysis of completed text products or performances, and cooperative modeling by the teacher with the whole class or by students in groups. Modeling by a more expert individual is fundamental to the social learning theory developed by Bandura (1977), and is considered by socio-cultural theorists to be “a powerful means of assisting performance” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 48). However, the use of models in L2 writing instruction is a contested issue, with critics maintaining that text models can misrepresent genres as templates, and so mislead students into overgeneralising on the basis of a small number of exemplars (e.g. Freedman, 1993; Johns, 2008) as well as perpetuating the structure and status of powerful genres that frequently exclude L2 writers (Benesch, 2001; Kroll, 2003). They point out that emphasising the rhetorical and grammatical structure of genre exemplars as the first stage of learning may also hinder the development of individual composing processes and the capacity to develop an authorial voice (e.g. Ivanic & Camps, 2001).

In contrast, advocates of the use of models point out that they provide novices with illustrations of expert use of particular language forms (Hyland, 2007), and can reduce complex cognitive demands to a more manageable level (Macbeth, 2010). Research evidence (e.g. Abbuhl, 2011; Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Stolarek, 1994; Swales, 1990) supports the view that if models are used as reference tools and combined with explicit instruction and guidance about composing processes, linguistic features and rhetorical purposes, if students have knowledge of the content but not the form of a genre, and if the complexity of the model is within their current capabilities, then models can be effective instructional tools.

Cumming (1995) stated that instructional modeling and evaluation of students’ texts are two of the primary functions of L2 writing instruction. He went on to propose a typology of three types of modeling: analysis of finished texts or structural patterns (text modeling), demonstrations by the teacher of skilled composing processes (cognitive modeling), and collaborative construction of texts by students in small groups or as a whole class, guided by the teacher (social modeling). Some empirical support for this classification can be found in an exploratory study of the instructional routines of four ESL writing teachers (Riazi, Lessard-Clouston, & Cumming, 1996) in which all three types of modeling were found to have been used by teachers, with text and social modeling featuring more frequently than cognitive modeling.

Genre-based approaches require explicit, teacher-led assistance in the stages of the teaching–learning cycle that involve familiarising learners with the genre, analysis of exemplars, and guided text construction, with all three potentially involving modeling strategies. While the risks associated with presenting a limited number of exemplars to students are emphasised by some scholars, others believe that modeling can play a useful role in assisting learners to successfully manage complex writing task demands.

2.3. The study

Teachers’ actual instructional practices for L2 writing are a somewhat neglected research area. In an extensive review of current disciplinary knowledge in this area, Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008, p. 80) make the point that “there have been surprisingly few research-based descriptions of L2 writing instruction”. Hedgcock (2005, p. 609) also draws our attention to the fact that there has been very little naturalistic research into “the nuts and bolts aspect of planning and instruction”, and Hinkel (2011) lists a range of types of instruction (e.g. discourse structuring and organisation, cohesion development, revising and editing) and innovative activities (e.g. dialog journals, examining models and collaborative writing) that can be said to be part of effective practice, while acknowledging that “research on principles for effective curriculum design or instructional methods for L2 writing is conspicuously missing” (p. 531).

For this reason, there is little evidence to either support or refute the view that “[t]he practices of L2 writing curriculum organisation and instruction appear to be pragmatic and eclectic rather than comprehensively principled” (Leki et al., 2008, p. 81), or that “fundamentally, writing is learned, rather than taught, and the teacher’s best methods are flexibility and support” (Hyland, 2002, p. 78). The dearth of investigations into teachers’ practices in general is reflected in the very small number of studies carried out on the use of text models (Abbuhl, 2011; Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Macbeth, 2010) or modeling strategies (Riazi et al., 1996) in L2 writing instruction.

The aim of the current study was to therefore to investigate the classroom practices of a number of experienced EAP writing practitioners working in pre-university and undergraduate courses. In situations where very few prior research findings exist, Dörnyei (2007, p. 308) advises that researchers should carry out “exploratory investigations that help us to map
the terrain first and fine-tune our specific research angle later in the project”, and that particular research interests need to be identified from the data. For this study, a general area of research interest was identified prior to data collection from the review of literature; namely, the extent to which genre-based and social learning theories influenced the practices of EAP writing teachers and underpinned their explanations for particular instructional choices. The study design was based on a fundamental principle of grounded theory: that theory develops inductively from the data through a process of themed coding of categories in order to identify information of interest (Richards, 2003).

The study can be described as interpretive and qualitative in that the research focus narrowed only after data collection was complete, descriptive information only was collected, no manipulation of the phenomena under investigation was attempted, and its overall aim was to gain a holistic, in-depth understanding of the practices of a relatively small sample of participants (Dörnyei, 2007).

3. Method

This section describes the study context and participants, and reports on the collection and analysis of data.

3.1. Context and participants

In New Zealand, EAP writing instruction for pre-university students is typically offered in single- or integrated-skill courses, and through compulsory or optional single-skill, credit-bearing courses for undergraduates. Due to practical constraints and the relatively broad focus of many undergraduate degrees (which require students to take a number of courses outside their majors), E.G.A.P instruction is more common. Currently, approaches that draw on principles of systemic functional linguistics and genre analysis are influential in education in New Zealand as elsewhere (e.g. Dix, 2012; Hammond, Burns, Joyce, Brosnan, & Gerot, 1992). A recent review of the local context reported that EAP writing instruction typically blends a focus on composing processes with text-based components that include syntax, academic vocabulary, genre analysis and text construction, with the specific emphasis largely determined by the level and type of course (Ker, Adams, & Skyrme, 2013).

To facilitate theory-building, this study used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit information-rich participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Departmental academic managers in five tertiary institutions were asked for approval for the study to take place, and then requested to approach teachers who they considered exemplary (i.e well-qualified, experienced, with good references from peers and students, and of high standing in their departments). Potential participants were therefore identified using generally accepted ways of establishing expertise (Cumming, 1992; Tsui, 2003). Seven teachers from five tertiary institutions in three main cities were approached, and agreed to take part. All seven had graduate academic qualifications, and three had or were completing doctorates in applied linguistics. They all had professional qualifications in TESOL and were career teachers. They each had 5–20 years of experience as EAP writing instructors, and up to 40 years of ESOL teaching experience overall. Five were female and two male. Three were originally from England, one from the United States, one from South Africa, and two from New Zealand.

Teachers were responsible for two pre-university, integrated-skill EAP courses (Ann, Bob), three 100-level (Carl, Dale, Ella), and two 200-level (Fay, Gabi) non-compulsory in-sessional writing courses for academic credit. These were all discipline-specific courses comprising four to 6 h of classroom instruction per week over a twelve-week academic semester. Examination of course outlines revealed that core curriculum components included attention to writing processes, understanding and learning how to write academic essays using sources (e.g. discussion, argument, explanation), and analysis and production of particular text types (e.g. cause and effect, process, problem–solution, explanation). Instruction in sentence-level grammar and paragraph writing (e.g. coherence and cohesion) was included in the pre-university and 100-level courses.

Students in the study classes were young adults from countries in East Asia, the Middle East, Polynesia and Europe. They were either in their final semester of preparation for university study or enrolled undergraduates in Arts, Business and Science degree programs. Their levels of proficiency, while mixed, were reasonably similar at IELTS 5.5–6.0 for students in pre-university courses, and IELTS 6.0–7.5 for those attending the in-sessional courses. Tutorial groups comprised 15–25 students on average.

3.2. Data collection

Information was gathered from class observations, interviews, and course documents. Data from observation field notes and course documents were the primary source of information about teachers’ instructional selections and the organisation of the observed lessons, supported by interview comments. These interview statements were the main source of information regarding teachers’ decisions and priorities. The researcher observed between four and six lessons of 90 min (Ann and Bob) or 2-h duration (the other five participants) of each course. Because the study endeavored to avoid disturbing the research setting, and on account of difficulties gaining ethical permission to record whole-class interactions in all institutions, lessons were not recorded. However, the researcher wrote detailed notes on each lesson observation with special attention to

2 All names are pseudonyms.
occurrences that addressed the general interests identified from the review of literature. Personal and theoretical field notes were composed after each observation, and both types were used to guide the post-observation interviews. Due to practical constraints such as in-class assessments, observations were not always of consecutive lessons; however, the 4–6 observations of each teacher’s classes were completed within a four week period.

An initial discussion with participants elicited information about the scope and purpose of the course, students in the class, contextual constraints and resources. In post-observation interviews of approximately 30 min, teachers were prompted to reflect on the content of the lesson they had just taught and to account for particular instructional choices they had made. Final interviews covered a broader range of issues, including questions about general principles and rationales for their preferred approaches. A total of 39 interviews were conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Interviews were semi-structured so as to gather similar information from each participant (Dörnyei, 2007), and endeavored to be empathic in order to gain access to teachers’ candid reflections and understandings. Course documents made available by teachers (e.g. syllabus and lesson plans, lesson handouts or in-house course texts, and assessment tasks) were used to supplement and support interview statements.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded inductively through repeated examination of observation notes, relevant interviews statements, and recent literature on EAP writing instruction and social learning pedagogies. Descriptive codes were assigned to interview statements about themes of interest that emerged from initial examination of the observed lessons. Interview comments were coded in “meaningful chunks” (Brice, 2005, p. 163) in order to contextualise them as fully as possible. Initial interview categories related to context, student and syllabus factors. Post-observation categories included the focus of the lesson, particular instructional choices, and teachers’ reflective comments on the lesson, students and current instructional priorities. Categories for the final interview with each participant related to the whole course: contextual and student constraints, and teachers’ views on effective practice in EAP writing instruction. Since these themes were interrelated, a number of utterances were assigned more than code. During this phase, explicit instruction involving models, modeling, and their organisation in EAP writing instruction emerged as an area of primary research interest. Using observation notes, lesson materials, and the typology developed by Cumming (1995), instances of text, cognitive and social modeling were identified, described and counted.

In order to strengthen the trustworthiness of data and minimise researcher bias, a colleague familiar with the project, and with expertise in this type of teaching, audited the observation data and the researcher’s coding of interview statements. With regard to the latter, one or two changes of category for particular interview comments were suggested, as well as an additional coding category for 16 of the interview statements. N-Vivo 10 Software (QSR International Inc.) was used to facilitate data retrieval and comparisons between thematically linked statements from different participants (Dörnyei, 2007).

### Table 1: Modeling strategies in observed lessons (8–12 h in total for each teacher).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ann</th>
<th>Bob</th>
<th>Carl</th>
<th>Dale</th>
<th>Ella</th>
<th>Fay</th>
<th>Gabi</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>(a) Text models: teacher-led analysis and discussion; whole class and group</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>The teacher led an explicit ‘bottom-up’ analysis of sentence-level language patterns in the model.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>The teacher presented notes on features of the text type or genre.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td>The teacher presented an achievable (proficient or flawed) model for analysis and critique.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>The teacher elicited a ‘top-down’ analysis of an exemplary model.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>Students completed guided writing tasks (e.g. gapped text outlines or text reformulation tasks) individually.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi</td>
<td>Students evaluated models, discussed their strengths and weaknesses, and ranked them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii</td>
<td>Students compared texts that they had written independently with a model or models.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>(b) Writing processes: teacher-led modeling; whole class</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>viii</td>
<td>The teacher presented and elicited a sequenced summary list of composing processes for a particular genre/text type.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix</td>
<td>The teacher verbalised the composing processes of a proficient writer while constructing a text.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>(c) Text construction: teacher-led collaborative modeling; whole class</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>The teacher facilitated text construction by eliciting from students and scaffolding their contributions. Students discussed the merits of different contributions.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xi</td>
<td>Students wrote short texts on the board. Students and the teacher discussed and edited the texts.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Text construction: social modeling; pairs and groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>xii</td>
<td>Students worked together to construct a text. The teacher assisted if requested.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiii</td>
<td>Students worked together to compare texts they had written independently. The teacher assisted if requested.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiv</td>
<td>Students worked together to complete gapped or jumbled texts, diagrams of text structures, or texts with missing elements.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quotations and summaries of participants’ views were included in the presentation of study findings to the fullest extent possible within space constraints, so that their voices could be represented.

4. Findings

This section presents information about the nature and organisation of instructional conversations involving modeling in the EAP writing lessons observed, and teachers’ explanations for particular choices. It adapts Cumming’s taxonomy of modeling (1995) to report on episodes identified from observation field notes, supported by course documents and interview statements. Table 1 presents a summary of 14 different types of modeling and its frequency of use by each teacher. As can be seen from the table, four strategies were used by six or all seven teachers and a further eight were used by four or five teachers. Three strategies were used by two teachers in the lessons observed. Frequency ranged from zero to five instructional episodes over 8–12 h of lesson observations.

4.1. Analysis and discussion of text models

Tasks involving text models (Strategies i, ii, iii, iv, vi) occurred on a regular basis in the lessons observed. Text models that were presented to students in order to introduce particular genres and text types included summaries (Ann, Bob, Carl), summary citations (Ella), academic essay exemplars (Dale, Gabi), and explanation texts (Fay). Using exemplary or achievable models, teachers tended to initially focus on the macro-structure and main moves of the text, followed by analysis of the text’s micro-structure (e.g. how coherence and clarity in sentences and paragraphs was achieved). In interviews, teachers explained that they viewed text models as a useful way of familiarising students with conventional text structures. In Gabi’s words (Int.2), “there are some students who would not know where to start without a model…they can’t conceptualise it otherwise”. Fay (Int.4) explained that with her 200-level class she usually selected a straightforward exemplar to first show the basic features of a genre before moving on to examine hybrid texts and discuss disciplinary variations.

Teachers also made use of proficient or flawed models (Strategy iii) that had been contributed by students from previous courses or custom-written by the teacher, and expressed a preference for these more accessible texts. Ella commented that model texts were of little use if the gap between the model and students’ current level of ability was too great. Several teachers reported spending time and effort to search out or create exemplars that were appropriate in terms of type and degree of complexity, and three (Bob, Dale and Gabi) noted the benefits of inserting particular errors and weaknesses and composing flawed text exemplars as a way of raising students’ awareness of possible errors or areas of difficulty. However (echoing views expressed in the scholarly debate on the pros and cons of models), Bob pointed out that while models were useful as illustrative exemplars, students had to be discouraged from straight copying, from regarding them as templates, or from accessing exemplars independently from the internet. He warned that overuse of models might well lead students to “focus only on the target product, and be unwilling to engage with process elements” (Int.1).

Practice activities based on text models included guided writing using frames or outlines by the teacher, and expressed a preference for these more accessible texts. Ella commented that model texts were of little use if the gap between the model and students’ current level of ability was too great. Several teachers reported spending time and effort to search out or create exemplars that were appropriate in terms of type and degree of complexity, and three (Bob, Dale and Gabi) noted the benefits of inserting particular errors and weaknesses and composing flawed text exemplars as a way of raising students’ awareness of possible errors or areas of difficulty. However (echoing views expressed in the scholarly debate on the pros and cons of models), Bob pointed out that while models were useful as illustrative exemplars, students had to be discouraged from straight copying, from regarding them as templates, or from accessing exemplars independently from the internet. He warned that overuse of models might well lead students to “focus only on the target product, and be unwilling to engage with process elements” (Int.1).

Practice activities based on text models included guided writing using frames or outlines (Strategy v) and tasks such as the one from Ann’s course in which students compared a proficient model with a text they had just written (Strategy vii). Following teacher-led analysis of models, repeated cycles of guided and independent text construction were observed and noted from interview statements. In Fay’s 200-level writing course, instruction on writing explanation texts commenced with sentence-level attention to various options for making means-purpose statements, followed by a reformulation task to give students initial practice in composing this particular type of statement. In the next phase of instruction, three texts (two student-generated and one published example) were presented for analysis before students attempted guided and independent text construction. Text models were used deductively to introduce new text types to the class (Strategies i, ii, iii, iv, vi) and inductively as a resource against which students could compare their own drafts (Strategy vii). Teachers reported that decisions about how and when to use text models took into consideration the complexity of the genre and its degree of familiarity for students, as well as considerations of balance and variety of instruction within a particular lesson or cluster.

4.2. Teacher modeling of composing processes

Two strategies in Table 1 (viii, ix) describe teacher modeling of their own composing processes as proficient writers. Four instances were recorded in which they elicited or modeled (by “thinking aloud”) composing processes for a particular text type, and 14 instances in which they elicited from or presented to the class (using whiteboards or document cameras) a sequenced summary list of composing processes. In a lesson in which students were experiencing difficulties writing a summary of a process text, Bob reassembled the class group and modeled the process of constructing one of the paragraphs before students continued working on the task individually. In this example of responsive use of modeling, the teacher elicited suggestions from students as he guided them through important aspects of writing a process text: giving an initial overview, providing carefully sequenced information, and using synonyms or clear explanations for key terms. In a lesson on writing using sources, Dale modeled the process of composing and inserting a citation into a referenced essay by thinking aloud as she composed examples that were displayed for the whole class using a document camera. Students were encouraged to suggest alternative paraphrases and ask questions (for example, about choice of vocabulary and use of particular punctuation). In another episode, Ann modeled a number of possibilities for sequencing cause and effect elements at sentence level before the class attempted a guided writing task.
The six teachers who modeled composing processes usually did so at or near the beginning of units of instruction. As with text models, the focus of attention was sometimes the macro-structure of the text, while on other occasions teachers modeled how to construct sentences and paragraphs. Ella and Bob believed that this strategy was a useful tool to help students understand the extent to which academic writing is a thoughtful and recursive activity requiring multiple drafts. Three teachers (Bob, Dale, and Gabi) pointed out that teacher modeling of composing processes was also helpful for raising students’ awareness about how they compose and edit, and “a good way of getting them to pinpoint more specifically what it is exactly that they’re having a problem with, and try to address that more directly” (Bob, Int1). He believed that awareness both of their own and of skilled composing processes was invaluable for students, since these processes were broadly transferable to a range of academic writing tasks.

4.3. Collaborative modeling by the teacher and class group

A third type of explicit instruction involved interactions by the teacher and the class group working together to construct or revise a text. Since this type of instructional conversation is in a number of respects different from student–student discussions, I have distinguished it from Cumming’s “social modeling”. Ten instances (involving five teachers) were noted in which student contributions were edited by the teacher and classmates (Strategy x). Five teachers used this type of modeling: three of them (Bob, Dale and Ella) more than once as part of instruction in how to write academic summaries and paraphrases. In each episode, teachers called for contributions from the class and wrote each one in turn onto the board or document camera. They then elicited revisions from the original contributor or other students which were used to improve on the original submission. In this way, with the teacher suggesting, eliciting, and responding to students’ contributions, a collaborative (but teacher-led) version of the text was constructed.

In post-course interviews, teachers commented on their use of this approach, noting that eliciting gave a larger number of students the chance to participate (Carl), and that drawing attention to the processes involved in construction a text as well as key features of the finished product promoted deeper learning in students, rather than simply the desire to imitate (Bob, Dale). Ella pointed out another benefit of collaborative modeling: that while students received immediate, constructive feedback and scaffolding assistance, the teacher obtained valuable information about learners’ developmental needs and the current level of ability and confidence in the class. Ella and Gabi noted that when students were trying to develop skills in writing complex academic texts such as paraphrase and summary citations, this kind of modeling was particularly useful for building experience and confidence. In Gabi’s 200-level course, students received positive feedback for acceptable contributions: however, the teacher also advanced their thinking by commenting on their submissions and eliciting further refinements.

Two teachers (Ella and Dale) pointed out that cooperative modeling strategies provided students with explicit evidence that there is no single correct text or way of constructing a text. One noted that “with all the different nationalities and types of students in the class, some of them come up with other ideas that are just as acceptable” (Dale, Int. 2); Dale also pointed out that this type of modeling produced texts that could then be analysed as achievable models. Three teachers used collaborative modeling strategies to reconstruct drafts composed by capable students by displaying them for the class to evaluate and edit (Strategy xi). However, Ann approached this type of modeling differently: while student groups worked on their research reports in an e-lab, she led each group in turn to revise its draft text.

4.4. Social modeling by students in pairs or groups

In the fourth type of modeling observed in EAP writing classes, students worked independently in pairs or groups, with teachers in a facilitating role. Strategies xii and xiii, which were observed ten and nine times in lessons taught by five of the teachers in the study, featured pair or group text construction tasks or tasks that required students to evaluate texts students they had drafted individually. Four instances of students working together to complete guided writing tasks (Strategy xiv) were also observed. In two classes, social modeling was used by students in order to compose texts that would be assessed for course credit. Ella’s class composed and edited a literature review using group emails to circulate draft versions (with tracked changes and comments), before a final text was produced by the group in an e-lab session. With support from the teacher, students in Ann’s and Bob’s classes worked in the e-lab to collaboratively compose library-based research reports for presentation to the class as part of the assessment requirements of the course. Students in Carl’s 100-level class each drafted a short descriptive text, worked in pairs to read and summarise their partner’s draft, and read their summaries back to their partners before working together to revise both draft texts.

Three teachers (Gabi, Bob and Fay) noted benefits as well as drawbacks to the different possibilities for pairing and grouping students (of mixed or equal ability; from similar or different cultural backgrounds and first languages). Gabi (Final Int.) pointed out that in classes of mixed ability, weaker students were often helped by more proficient classmates, and that in a class of students from different cultural backgrounds, “there are some things that come through from somebody of their own age and culture much better than they come through from me.” With groups of novice undergraduate writers, she thought it important “to push the idea that in discussions they can offer ideas and spark ideas from others, and that they don’t need a teacher with them for every activity.”

Fay pointed out that working with a partner or in a group sometimes helped to build a student’s confidence, and that this was particularly important when new, challenging writing tasks were being attempted. For this reason, she (and Gabi) gave
students the opportunity to discuss in groups how they were going to approach major assignment tasks (an explanation text and a referenced academic essay), and the composing strategies they planned to employ. Bob (Int.1) pointed out the need to build confidence, and that “you can feel the atmosphere loosen up…they are able to admit to their partner that they don’t understand something, or ask a question.” A further advantage identified by Gabi was that larger number of students participated than in whole-class activities; however, one teacher (Carl) commented that the usefulness of social modeling depended on the ability, size, and dynamics of the class group.

A number of drawbacks of social modeling were identified. In interview statements, one teacher (Bob) noted that some students found the idea of writing collaboratively with other students difficult, unhelpful and inauthentic, and preferred to compose their own first drafts before working with a partner or group. Other teachers mentioned the significant amount of time that the reporting-back phase often required, the possibility that students would stray off-task during the group composing phase, and that very fluent, outgoing students could severely constrain opportunities for collaborative text construction.

5. Discussion

These findings provide evidence that models and modeling strategies occurred frequently in the lessons observed for this study, and that they were part of the instructional repertoires of each teacher. Text modeling delivered transparency as to text types, the level of mastery that was expected and an explicit focus on language forms and prefabricated patterns, and was complemented by instruction involving modeling of composing processes and collaborative/social modeling (led by the teacher, by the teacher and class group together or by groups of students). Together, these strategies provided a linked focus on text micro-structure and macro-structure and a way of raising student writers’ awareness of the need to coordinate thinking and writing processes, as well as their responsibilities with regard to the reader. They also enabled the teacher to diagnose students’ immediate needs, support their current level of skill, and open up learning opportunities within the ZPD. For the most part, teachers used modeling as part of planned instruction, but there was also evidence of responsive use to provide immediate, customised assistance to students (e.g. Strategies vi, xiii, x). Models and modeling were employed in all except Carl’s process-oriented course when new genres or text types were being introduced. For the most part, instruction took a deductive “presentation – practice – production” approach that followed (with some flexibility) the three key steps of the teaching–learning cycle associated with systemic functional linguistics (Hammond et al., 1992; Hyland, 2007): explicit instruction, guided and independent text construction. However, occasionally experiential, task-based approaches were used in which independent construction was the initial phase of instruction (e.g. Strategies vii, xi).

The way in which modeling strategies were used provides support for the view that explicit instruction in which the teacher plays a leading role is essential for skill development in the L2 writing classroom. Teachers in this study endeavored to prevent mere surface learning (imitation) by providing a range of model exemplars for each genre or text type, and by setting tasks to build understanding, skill and confidence. Deductive, whole-class analysis of text models was followed in due course by tasks that required students to transform that knowledge in guided or independently constructed texts of their own. Students’ awareness of composing processes (their own and those used by proficient writers) was developed, and through interactions with peers and the teacher they became active participants in the meticulous, recursive process of constructing academic texts.

In the five study courses at pre-university and 100-level, instruction emphasised syntactic and lexical accuracy, clarity and coherence at sentence and paragraph levels, analysis of simulated authentic models, and composing processes. However, in the two 200-level courses the curriculum was broader and less prescriptive: students were introduced to disciplinary variation in model exemplars and to reasons for texts being constructed in a particular way. This shift in emphasis, and the absence of attention to issues of equity and power in any of the courses, provides support for claims that the instructional emphasis varies according to level and type of course (Cumming et al., 2006), and that critical approaches are more suited to instruction for advanced postgraduate writers (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

Findings of the study confirm that product/genre- and process- distinctions are by no means clear-cut in the taught curriculum (Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Wette, 2011). All seven teachers maintained that while their main focus was assisting learners with the processes involved in constructing particular text types, they also included attention to transferable composing skills, and did not regard product and process as discrete curriculum components. In Carl’s words, “the product is always what they’re going to be judged on, but the way to get there is a process and that’s what they need to pay attention to”. Process-oriented elements in the lessons observed included raising awareness of composing and editing options and increasing students’ fluency through practice, while developing students’ understanding of how clarity and coherence can be achieved in key academic genres and text types was the main product-oriented goal. The distinction between EGAP and ESAP in these courses was also blurred. While none could be described as conventionally ESAP, the five 100- and 200-level courses included analysis and composition of text models specifically chosen from disciplinary areas in which members of the class were studying e.g. Marketing, Sociology and Psychology, and no personal expression writing featured in any of the courses.

These results also provide some evidence on the question of whether L2 writing teachers base their instruction on eclectic, idiosyncratic choices or on a comprehensive set of pedagogic principles (Leki et al., 2008). Teachers in this study did not follow any single approach or method, but drew on a range of process- and product-oriented principles to meet the needs of particular groups of students. Although there were many similarities across the group in the way they used modeling strategies in the lessons observed, they did not always use them in exactly the same way, to the same extent, in the same
proportion, or at the same place in the teaching–learning cycle. This confirms claims in the literature (Cummings et al., 2006; Riazì et al., 1996; Shi & Cumming, 1995) that while a number of core instructional practices may be shared, L2 writing instruction varies according to the needs and abilities of class groups and the curriculum requirements of course types.

In final interviews, teachers were asked to comment more generally on their instructional choices and priorities. The main focus of these remarks was the extent to which they felt they were successfully assisting students to bridge the gap between their current proficiency and what was required for success in university-level courses, and the particular abilities students still needed to develop. In particular, teachers noted the importance of learning the value of certain composing techniques such as allowing time for cycles of rereading and redrafting (Cari, Ella), and attending to the macro-structure of the text they were composing in order to achieve coherence (Dale, Ella) and reduce overall task demands (Bob, Gabi). Although they also spoke about particular instructional practices, teachers were clearly attentive to their primary goal of accurately identifying students’ developmental needs, and by selecting the most effective means at their disposal to connect them with the requirements of the curriculum (Freeman & Johnson, 2005).

6. Conclusion

In this study, information about particular instructional strategies used by seven experienced EAP writing teachers is offered as evidence of good, principled practice. It provides empirical support for the usefulness of models and modeling strategies, and contributes to current knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy in EAP writing. Its findings show that modeling brings together textual, cognitive and interactional components of the curriculum and provides learning opportunities through study of exemplars followed by guided and independent text construction. Furthermore, modeling provides evidence of the value of instructional discourse involving teachers and students in conversation as a way of building knowledge and skill, thus confirming a key principle of constructivism. In its blending of teacher authoritativeness and planned instruction with an open, democratic approach to instruction and responsiveness to students’ developing understandings, modeling strategies also represent an attempt to resolve what has been described as a fundamental paradox in teaching (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

There can be no certainty about the generalisability of the findings of any small-scale, context-dependent research. The value of this study lies in the extent to which its findings resonate with teachers in similar contexts (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999), writing scholars and teacher educators. While data from lesson observations give an indication of customary practices, and interview data provide information about practices that teachers used on other occasions, no comprehensive account of instruction over an entire course was attempted. The information presented in Table 1 is therefore only indicative, and teachers might well have used these or other types of modeling strategies more or less frequently in lessons not observed.

Further research is needed before the value of modeling as an instructional tool can be accurately determined. This could involve audio or video recording of classroom discourse to show in more detail how modeling strategies are enacted in instructional conversations. Gains in students’ ability to compose academic texts as a result of modeling instruction could also be measured, although advances in procedural knowledge in sophisticated academic literacies are seldom immediately visible in students’ texts. However, these findings suggest that the use of modeling strategies in EAP writing instruction as a means of opening up learning opportunities to assist students gain proficiency in complex, learned academic literacies is an area worthy of further consideration and investigation.

References


