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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Context-model-based instruction in teaching EFL writing: A narrative inquiry

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Abstract: This study aims to re-story the provision of the context-model-based instruction in teaching EFL writing, focusing especially on students' development of the context model and learning to guide EFL writing with the context model. The research data have been collected from the audio recordings of the classroom instruction, the teacher-researcher's memos, and the students' reflections on their learning experience in the study. The findings that have resulted from this narrative inquiry show (1) the context-model-based instruction has helped students develop their context model; (2) students could learn to configure the four elements of the context model (i.e. "the purpose of communication, the subject matter, the relationship with the reader and the normal pattern of presentation"); and (3) students could learn to be mindful to proactively apply the context model in the process of EFL writing to manage the situated, dynamic and intercultural issues involved.

Subjects: Action Research & Teacher Research; Bilingualism / ESL; English & Literacy/Language Arts; Teaching & Learning

Keywords: context model; context-model-based instruction; EFL writing; narrative inquiry; TESOL

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In teaching writing in English as a foreign language, it is imperative that learners develop an appropriate understanding of the context where their writing is used. This study aims to re-story the provision of classroom instruction that is based on the theory of "context model", focusing especially on students' development of an appropriate understanding of the targeted context and use it to guide their writing. The research data are collected from the audio recordings of the classroom instruction, the teacher-researcher's memos and the students' reflections. The findings of this narrative inquiry have shown (1) instruction based on the context-model has helped students develop a contextual understanding; (2) students could learn to manage the purpose of communication, the subject matter, the relationship with the reader, and the normal way of presentation in writing; and (3) students could learn to be mindful to proactively use their contextual understanding to guide their writing.

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1. Introduction

Writing in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) is a cognitive, social and intercultural activity. It involves (1) the knowledge of the content that the writing is to address, (2) the knowledge of the English language that is required for the construction of the text, (3) the knowledge of the process that concerns how to construct the text, (4) the knowledge of the genre that the target text belongs to and (5) the knowledge of the context that involves the reader's expectation, cultural preference and the related texts (Hyland, 2003). What the EFL learner writes and how the learner writes and for whom the learner writes are usually shaped by the social convention and the history of social interaction that the learner is primarily associated with (Hayes, 1996). For an EFL composition to serve a particular purpose of communication, the composition should be recognised as appropriate or at least acceptable by its intended reader as enacting the "right" socially situated and culturally appropriate activity (Gee, 2004, p. 24). To produce such a right and appropriate EFL composition, the learner would have to come to terms with the intended reader, linking language and culture, putting the target foreign culture in relation with the learner's own (Kramsch, 1993, p. 205), exercising what Byram refers to as *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram, Morgan, & Colleagues, 1997, p. 22) and guiding EFL writing with what van Dijk calls the *context model* (2008, p. 16).

2. The context-model-based and the genre-based instruction

The literature of TESOL documents a wide range of studies about teaching ESL/EFL writing. Among them were studies about the use of L1 (the learner's native language) for writing in L2 (the additional language that the learner learns) (Brooks-Carson & Cohen, 2000; Wang & Wen, 2002); about revision at the discourse level (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2001; Yang & Shi, 2003); about the impact of social and cultural contexts (Bloch, 2002; Reichelt, 2003); about variations in genre (Badger & White, 2000; Weber, 2001); about linguistic accuracy (Frodesen & Holten, 2003) and about classroom instruction (Blanton & Kroll, 2002; Johns, 2003; Silva, 1990) … just to name a few. However, little is documented in the literature about the relationships between learning EFL writing and the learner's understanding of the context where the EFL composition is situated.

In as early as 1993, Kramsch introduced the concept of *interculturality*, noting that the teacher of EFL should include in teaching an understanding of foreignness or otherness (1993, p. 205). Following a similar line of thought, Byram introduced the concept of *intercultural communicative competence* (1997, p. 22), emphasising in particular that, when learners are engaged in an act of communication with someone from the target foreign culture, they have to bring to the situation and incorporate in the discourse their knowledge of the culture, communicative skills and relevant attitudes. More recently, van Dijk (2008) used the *context model* to represent one's understanding of the society, culture and discourse that one brings to a communication event. The context model, therefore, is one's definition or understanding of the communicative situation or context. It is socially based and subjective in nature, and is constructed dynamically and updated constantly through communication events of the like (van Dijk, 2008, 2009).

The context model adopted in this study consists of four elements: the understanding that concerns *the purpose of communication, the subject matter, the relationship with the reader* and *the normal pattern of presentation*. When we write, we usually do so with a social and communicative purpose. What we write, to whom we write and how we write are shaped not only by our linguistic competence but also by the context model we bring to the communication event (van Dijk, 1997). Writers with different culture backgrounds may not conceive the same situation in the same way, therefore, learners of EFL writing should learn to develop the context model to guide the production of the writing that will be recognised and accepted as "appropriate" in the target discourse in regard to its "specific ways of acting-interacting-thinking-believing-valuing-feeling" (Gee, 2004, p. 24).

This four-dimensional configuration of the contextual model relates closely to *genre, field, tenor* and *mode* in systemic functional grammar. The connections between them can be explicitly presented as follows (Eggins, 2004):

(1) *the purpose communication* relates to the *genre* in the sense that it is goal-oriented, purposeful and culture-specific and is accomplished through language;

(2) *the subject matter* relates to the *field* in the sense that it identifies the focus of the writing activity that the discourse is engaged in;

(3) *the relation with the reader* relates to the *tenor* in the sense that it shapes the social role relationships that are played by the parties involved in the discourse;

(4) *the normal pattern of presentation* relates to the *mode* in the sense that it realises the role that language plays in the discourse.

In teaching EFL writing, the distinctive difference between the context-model-based instruction and the genre-based instruction lies in the perspectives they take: the former is conceived from the perspective of the learner, while the latter is from the perspective of the written product. In other words, the former is more about the learner's understanding and knowledge while the latter is more concerned with the features of the learner's writing.

This study aims to produce the findings to be presented in the form of a narrative that shows how the context-model-based instruction is implemented in teaching EFL writing and that is based on the analysis of the recordings of the context-model-based instruction made by the teacher-researcher and the students' responses in the EFL classroom in a period of three weeks, the teacher-researcher's memos, and the students' reflections after the study.

3. Research question

This research aims to address the research question—How was the context-model-based instruction implemented in teaching EFL writing and how did the students respond to the mediation thus provided?

4. Method

This study was conducted in a teachers' university in China with a class of 30 first-year students who specialised in the English language education and were trained to be secondary EFL teachers in China. The participating students shared the same first language (Chinese) and were brought up in Chinese culture. Since the project was part of routine classroom teaching, students' consent to their participation in the project was sought and granted following the protocol of the host university and students have all demonstrated a strong interest in the study. The design of the study has followed Labov's "Evaluation Model of Narrative Analysis" (Cortazzi & Archer, 2002). As Smith (2000) noted, Labov's method is powerful for understanding major events in the narrative data and the effect those events has on the individuals from whom the narrative data have been elicited. His evaluation model organises the data into a set number of pre-set categories although the narrative elements may not occur in the said order in the data collected from diverse sources (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Following the same vein, this narrative inquiry has aimed to produce a narrative of the mediation of the context-model-based instruction in class and the students' responses to such mediation.

The context-model-based instruction was presented basically through a four-staged teaching and learning cycle (Feez, 1998), which started with the stage of configuring the context (when the students were engaged in the activities to instantiate the four elements of the context model for a particular EFL writing event), followed by the stage of joint construction (when the students worked in group to produce EFL writing for the intended event), and then by the stage of deconstruction and linking-the-related-texts (when the teacher-researcher deconstructed the group presentations in class and made links to the related texts), and concluded in the stage of independent construction (when the students produced independently EFL essays on a given topic).

Fundamentally, the study is based on the verbal data collected through three resources: (1) the transcripts of the five two-hour sessions of classroom teaching across three weeks with a three or

four days interval in-between; (2) the teacher-researcher's memos and (3) the participating students' reflections on their experiences at the end of the three-week study.

The research data analysis has taken three main steps: As a first step, narratives or stories were extracted from the diverse data, namely the transcripts of the recordings, the teacher-researcher's memos and the students' reflections, showing how the context-model-based instruction has been provided in the classroom and how students have responded to it. For the next stage, the resultant narratives were analysed into Labov's (Cortazzi & Archer, 2002) six categories as follows:

Abstract (optional)—What was this about?

Orientation—Who? When? What? Where?

Complication—Then what happened?

Evaluation—So what?

Result—What finally happened?

Coda (optional)

(Cortazzi & Archer, 2002, p. 45)

The final stage of analysis has involved a grounded thematic analysis of the abstracts and evaluations of all these narratives. The recurrence of particular themes detected in the analysis has finally led to the identifications of the findings of this narrative inquiry.

5. Result

The result of the study is a narrative that describes how the context-model-based instruction has been provided in an EFL writing classroom and how the participating students have responded to such mediation. The data collected via the recordings of the classroom teaching, the teacher-researcher's memos and the students' reflections at the end of this study were pieced and woven together to form the narrative which is structured on the basis of Labov's Evaluation Model of Narrative Analysis (Cortazzi & Archer, 2002).

The narrative consists of four parts corresponding to the four stages of the teaching and learning cycle in which the context-model-based instruction was provided.

5.1. Part 1: the stage of configuring the context

The initial session began with the introduction of the concept of *Context Model*. When the teacher-researcher showed the slide that defines the context model and its four componential elements, the class appeared to be at a loss. This frustration was reported in students' reflections:

I don't know what is context and I don't know what model means. (St5)

How can context become an understanding? I cannot imagine. (St8)

I cannot see how context and model or context and understanding can be put together. They are two kinds of things. How can we use them to talk about the same thing? (St2)

Students' initial frustration was also reflected in the teacher-researcher's memo:

The concept of *Context-Model* was introduced initially through a PowerPoint presentation. I was rather disappointed when I saw the blank looks on the students' faces. The concept of Context-Model seemed to fail to register with the students ... (TR-memo)

Having noticed the students' frustration, the teacher-researcher immediately turned to the next slide and used the following four questions to activate students' prior knowledge and experience about L1 writing to help students assimilate and accommodate the new information about the context model.

Your context model is your answers to the four questions about its elements:

1) What is the purpose of the writing?
2) What is writing about?
3) What is your relationship with the reader?
4) How will you present your ideas in writing? (Excerpt from Session 1)

Immediately, the students appeared to understand what the context model means as they noted in their reflections. "We learned them at school in Chinese [i.e. the first language]" (St1). However, with the fourth element, some students did not know what the pattern of presentation meant, nor had they ever come across the concept of genre in English. "We had no idea what is called 'pattern of presentation' and we don't know what is genre either" (St3). To solve the problem, the teacher-researcher used a number of well-known Chinese examples to illustrate what genre means and how a normal pattern of presentation is associated with a genre in Chinese, which readily brought home to the class what these concepts mean in EFL writing.

The recorded instruction below shows that students were asked to keep the four elements in mind when they negotiated within the group to propose a topic for their writing task:

We need to identify and make it clear, as clear as possible, to ourselves when we make a plan for our writing. That is, we must have a clear idea why we write, what we write, to whom we write and how we are going to write and nothing could be more important than the four elements at this stage [of planning for the writing]. (TR-instruction)

Here are another two excerpts of classroom teaching.

… If we are going to write to a pen friend in Australia, we need to decide what is appropriate for such a letter. Will it be OK to write about something personal? How can you decide what is appropriate and what is not? Something that is OK for a pen friend we have known for a long time may not be OK at all if it is the first time you write to him or her … The way you write may be quite appropriate if you both share the same culture and region but may not be acceptable if you know you are from different cultures or different religious backgrounds. For example … (TR-instruction)

… When we have decided to write an article for *The 21st Century*, the purpose of the article becomes very important. We may want to tell a story of our own, to introduce a book, to recommend a movie or to call for a change in something we don't agree with … (TR-instruction)

In order to engage students' executive motivation (Schumann, 1997), the teacher-researcher asked the class to work in the six existing groups and each group should work together to propose a topic for EFL writing. As the monitor of the class noted in his reflection, "We were better motivated because, from the very beginning, we were involved in decision-making about what we were going to write and for whom and for what purpose. It was good to use such a negotiated task".

Through a series of brainstorming and negotiations, the class decided on the writing task and its context, that is, writing a feature article for an English newspaper—*The 21st Century*, a newspaper for English learners in China. At the end of the session, the teacher-researcher asked each group to jointly construct an outline for the article and presented it at the next session and each group should make sure the context model be explicitly configured and used to guide the construction of the outline.

5.2. Part 2: the stage of joint construction
Joint construction took place twice during the study. First, it was for writing an outline for the given topic; and then it was the joint construction of an essay to present to the whole class afterwards. The

data about the joint construction were collected solely through each group's presentation in class and students' reflections at the end of the study.

It appeared that the six groups worked in different ways. Four patterns have been identified.

Two groups adopted Pattern A: Each member made his/her initial draft independently. On the basis of the individual drafts, the group jointly worked out the essay and presented it to the class.

Another two groups followed Pattern B: One member volunteered or was chosen to make the first draft, while others provided support if need be. On the basis of the first draft, the group jointly worked out the essay for group presentation.

One group employed Pattern C: All the members worked together at an agreed time from the initial stage till the last when the essay was ready for presentation.

One group used Pattern D: The five members could never agree on anything. In the end, the group leader had to exercise his power to divide the task into two: two members did the outline while the other three did the essay.

5.3. Part 3: the stage of deconstruction and linking related texts

The stage of deconstruction and linking related texts took place across three sessions. Initially, the six groups took turn to present to the class their jointly constructed outlines through a data projector. The teacher made detailed comments on each presentation, focusing especially on the configuration of the four elements of the context model, showing how the configuration of the four elements had shaped the outlines.

According to the students' reflections, students have learned to be mindful about proactively employing their context model in EFL writing.

In the past, when I make a plan, I consider only the opening, the body and the concluding part of the text. I may also think of the situation before, but I never use it to make my plan. But now, the context model has told me I must do more and I must ask myself the four questions before making my plan. (St9)

Now I know if I want to write a good composition, I must make sure it is right for the context. Make sure the purpose is OK, the topic is OK, the relation with the reader is OK and the style is OK too. (St11)

After commenting on the six outlines, the teacher-researcher introduced two English patterns for making comparison in English writing: the point-by-point pattern and the block-by-block pattern (Truscott, 2012), because the pending writing task would require making comparison. The teacher-researcher then asked the six groups each to jointly construct an essay on the topic: "Introduce Mistletoe—a plant of love, making specific reference to the episode about mistletoe from Friends [an American TV series]". Each group should make sure to guide writing with their chosen context model.

During the following sessions, the six groups again took turn to present the essays they jointly constructed. The teacher-researcher made detailed comments on each of the presentation, directing attention to the various decisions that were made in the process of writing, pointing out how some problems in the essay could be attributed to improper configurations of the context model (see the excerpt below, for example).

Let's look at this paragraph [see the paragraph below in the square brackets, where the number at the beginning of a sentence indicates the sequence in which the sentence appears in the paragraph]. All the sentences are grammatical but they don't make a

coherent paragraph. [The teacher-researcher reads aloud the first sentence.] It implies that we all desire for love is the topic. But the second sentence turns to talking about the different ways we use to strengthen our existing relationships. You see, the purposes of the two sentences are different. They talk about two different topics, one is about love and the other is about people using different methods to strengthen their relationships with friends and family members. [The teacher-researcher continues to read the third sentence.] Look, the topic changes again. This is about exchanging gifts and creating opportunities for people in love … The problem we have here is the organisation of the ideas. When we are writing, we need to keep on asking ourselves what is the purpose of the sentence, how it is related to the previous sentence and what will come next … (TR-instruction)

[(1)All human have desire for love. (2)Besides, human use different ways to strengthen their relationship with friends and family. (3)We exchange gifts to suggest people that we really cherish the relationship between us, and we even create special festivals to express our love or give us chances to have more time to be with them. (4)We create thanksgiving to express our appreciation, mother's day to thank mothers, and Christmas to have the opportunity to be with people we love. (5)It's not which way we choose but what we want to show that matters.]

The teacher's comments also related to the management of the relationship with the intended reader as well as the writer's commitment or judgement of the information provided in the text. See the excerpt below for an example.

I like this opening paragraph. It is friendly in tone and is informal and conversational in style. Such a tone and style tells the reader that you are going to treat him or her as a friend and this is going to be a friendly conversation. So you are likely to draw a favourable response from the audience. I don't think you would ever want to listen to someone who speaks in an arrogant manner and uses *guanqiang* [i.e. a bureaucratic style]. It is the same in English. I like the use of this rhetoric question, *fanwenju* [i.e. the equivalent of rhetoric question in Chinese] here. It is very good. Together with the dialogue here, it not only introduces mistletoe but also arouses the reader's attention and curiosity about it … (TR-instruction)

Another point that the context-model-based instruction at this stage intended to make was about the influence of contextual factors, that is, how the configuration of the four elements of the context model shaped the construction of the text. Consider the excerpt below, where the teacher-researcher pointed out to the class how the intended relationship with the reader and the choice of the rhetoric device were shaped by the configuration of the context model.

Let's take another look at the paragraph. This time, we try to find out the influence of the four elements of the [context] model. We know the purpose of the writing is to tell the reader the story of mistletoe in western culture, the intended readers are students of English like you and they may not know what mistletoe is and you would like to arouse their interest in the story of mistletoe through your writing. You wanted to treat them as your friends and NOT as your students, so you would like your writing to be informal and friendly and *kouyuhua* [i.e. Chinese equivalent for colloquial]. The influence is quite clear. We want to arouse the reader's interest in the story, so we used this *fanwenju* [i.e. the equivalent of rhetoric question in Chinese] at the very beginning. We want readers to treat us as their friends, so we used the conversational and informal English. (TR-instruction)

The scaffolding provided at this stage about textual organisation was in the form of modelling, showing how making meanings in EFL writing should follow the norm of English presentation (see the excerpt below):

We keep the first sentence as it is. [He reads the first sentence and then suggests the revised second sentence as] "and we use different ways to strengthen our love." We need to repeat the word "love" to maintain the connection between the two sentences. Love is a kind of relationship, I know this is what you want to say, but we cannot expect "love" and "relationship" to stand for each other here in English unless we explicitly tell the reader about the connection between them. We repeat "love" instead, OK? Here we use a column

to introduce "the different ways". [He reads aloud the third sentence and then, pointing at the end of the sentence, says] "For example", we need "for example" here to indicate the connection between these two sentences [i.e. the third and the fourth sentence]. The concluding sentence needs to echo the topic sentence and sum up the paragraph. How can we revise the last sentence? ... (TR-instruction)

The importance of textual organisation was also noted in students' reflections although they used the terms of "textual structure" or "logical development" instead.

In the past, we paid a lot attention to writing beautiful sentences and using beautiful words and expressions, but now we know better. I think textual structure is more important. People don't know what you are talking about if your ideas are not properly organised. (St25)

I realise it is most important and also most difficult to make my writing *geng didao* [the Chinese equivalent to "more idiomatic"]. Textual model helped me to arrange the textual structure and to handle logical development of ideas. (St 22)

Cross-cultural differences in discursive practice between the norms of the learners' L1 and those of EFL were another focus of the context-model-based instruction. It was rather clearly reflected in the students' reflections:

I want to learn to write real English, the way English people write. The teacher's comments in class help me to see how I can work on it. (St5)

I found it most difficult to present different events for different situations in different *wenti* [the Chinese equivalent for genre]. It needs our experience in using these different *wenti* and knowing these different situations. The teacher's comments are helpful since the teacher is more experienced in this. (St8)

I felt the teacher's comments are most beneficial to me. His comments have better depth than peers and usually to the point and may help me to fix the problem. I often don't know what is wrong until I read the teacher's comments. (St16)

This was also reflected in the teacher's memo as well:

I felt very much rewarded when I heard the audible "Wow" from the class after I called their attention to the sentence in a text—"If you had been more careful, you would have noticed the episode of mistletoe"—and alerted the class to its possibly offending implication if the reader happened not to notice the episode. Students were surprised because such a rhetoric device is commonly used in Chinese prose writing and is usually appreciated as a good way to introduce a new topic. (TR-memo)

At the end of the session for joint construction, the teacher and the class jointly formulated a topic for the final independent composition in Week 3—"Write an article for *The 21st Century* to introduce two plants of love 'mistletoe" from the western culture and "grapevine" from the Chinese culture". According to the teacher-researcher's memo, this was intended to be an opportunity for students to apply what they had learned from the previous four sessions to a similar communication event. Students were encouraged to make whatever preparation they deemed necessary, and they were also notified that they were not supposed to copy from a draft at the time of independent writing.

5.4. Part 4: the stage of independent construction

This is the final stage of the story where all the 30 participating students wrote an EFL essay on the topic provided in the previous session. In the limited one hour, the students could use smartphones to browse the Internet, or the App of electronic dictionaries on the phone, but they had to use pen and paper to write the essay. The teacher-researcher moved in the classroom and answered the questions that some students raised about the page-layout or the word limit, etc. The independent writing was then followed by another hour of writing—providing personal reflection in EFL or in L1 or

in both on the learning experience in participating in the study and making recommendations for the improvement in the delivery of the context-model-based instruction as well.

6. Discussion and implications

This study has investigated the provision of the context-model-based instruction in an EFL writing classroom. The narrative that stemmed from the investigation has shown that the context-model-based instruction has helped students develop their context model and that the students could learn to configure the four elements of the context model, and be mindful to proactively apply the context model in the process of EFL writing to manage the situated, dynamic and intercultural issues involved. The narrative has also shown that the learners' assimilation and accommodation of the context model could be facilitated through activating prior learning and existing knowledge of writing, through parsing the text, analysing how the configuration of the context model has influenced the presentation of ideas and examining how the management of the relationship with the intended reader rests in the construction of the text.

There have been studies reported in the literature about genre-based approach to teaching English writing (Cheng, 2006; Flowerdew & Wan, 2005; Lin, 2006). They tended to focus on the deconstruction of the model text and the connection between reading and writing in learning and teaching English writing. Unlike those studies, this study has focused on the agency of the learner, the learner's role in learning EFL writing, showing how students could be scaffolded through the context-model-based instruction and learn to incorporate their understanding of the context with the configuration of the four elements of the context model in the process of EFL writing.

The implication of this study is therefore twofold: First, students of EFL writing can be explicitly instructed on the context model and learn to develop the context model and thereby foster their *interculturality* necessary for EFL writing. The context-model-based instruction should enable students to assimilate and accommodate the new information with their prior learning experience and their existing knowledge about writing, and the instruction should be coupled with proper scaffolding and modelling. Second, teaching EFL writing should take into account the contestations of the influences coming from the norms of the learners' L1-referenced primary culture and those of the EFL-referenced culture. It is therefore imperative that students of EFL writing should learn to make informed decisions on issues concerning cross-cultural differences when they are engaged in EFL writing.

Finally, it must be noted that this study is fundamentally a narrative inquiry following Labov's "Evaluation Model of Narrative Analysis" (Cortazzi & Archer, 2002). Therefore, the main objective of the study has been to re-story the provision of the context-model-based instruction in teaching EFL writing, and to focus especially on students' development of the context model and learning to guide EFL writing with the context model. It follows that the strength and also the limitation of this inquiry are bound to lie squarely in the narrative findings that have been extracted from the research data. The thick description and the detailed account of the outcome of the study are intended to offer the reader a case that can be referred to for information or inspiration or a spark when engaged in teaching EFL writing.

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