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The use of exemplars in English writing classrooms: from theory to practice

Sin Wang Chong 

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Recent literature on the use of exemplars in the context of higher education has shown that exemplar-based instruction is implemented in various disciplines; nevertheless, how exemplar-based instruction can be implemented in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing classrooms in higher education institutions remains under-explored. In this connection, this article reports on a textbook development project which adopts an exemplar-based instruction approach to be used by university English instructors to prepare students for IELTS writing (academic module). The goal of the textbook is to cultivate students' understanding of the assessment standards of the two IELTS writing tasks through the design and use of exemplar-based dialogic and reflective activities. In this article, theoretical underpinnings of the use of exemplars, namely tacit knowledge, assessment as learning and dialogic feedback, will first be discussed in detail. Then, an overview of an ongoing project which aims to develop an exemplar-based IELTS writing textbook will be given. The last section of this article suggests practical strategies for ESL writing teachers who are interested in using exemplars to develop students' understanding of assessment standards.

KEYWORDS

use of exemplars; exemplar-based instruction; English as a second language writing; higher education

Introduction

Three approaches to ESL writing instruction

In the past three to four decades, three approaches to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) writing instruction have influenced the classroom practices of teachers, namely *a product approach*, *a process approach*, and more recently, *a genre approach*. The three approaches are often used in combination and there are overlaps in terms of instructional focuses (Hyland, 2015).

The product approach, which emphasizes the instruction of language system knowledge (Tribble, 1996), was popular in the early 1980s in ESL writing instruction. Here, writing is taught in a way that emphasizes the 'quality' of the final product. The 'quality' of a piece of writing is often defined narrowly to entail accuracy in grammar, mechanics (e.g. spelling, punctuation) and style (Young, 1978). Teachers who adopt a product approach to writing instruction often divide their lessons into four linear stages: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing (Badger & White, 2000). In the stage of 'familiarization', students review sample texts of the same text-type and teachers pinpoint the surface features of the text. Then, students engage in 'controlled writing' and 'guided writing' practices to apply the skills needed for the final writing task in the form of filling in blanks and writing short sentences. After rounds of practice,

students write on a given topic ('free writing') and teachers give summative feedback on their performance with a particular focus on language errors (Lee, 2007).

Unlike the product approach, a *process approach* puts the teaching of writing steps in the foreground (Pennington, Brock and Yue, 1996). It highlights the cyclical nature of writing from planning, writing, to editing with a heightened emphasis on developing students' awareness through timely intervention in the form of feedback in a bid to 'maximize each student's intellectual participation in the writing process' (Susser, 1994, p. 4). Typically, the planning stage of the process approach involves students brainstorming ideas on a given topic and developing their content knowledge on the topic. At the writing stage, students complete an outline or 'writing frame' (Wray and Lewis, 1997) before producing the first draft of writing. Afterwards, they may exchange their work with their peers and receive feedback from them. As for the role of teachers, the teacher provides less direct input but more facilitation in the form of formative feedback than in the product approach (Wingate, 2010; Lee, 2017).

More recently, there has been the advent of a *genre approach* which originates from functional linguistics and communicative sociocultural approaches to language teaching (Halliday, 1994; Hyland, 2004). 'Genre' is defined as 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes' (Swales, 1990, p. 58). To proponents of the genre approach, writing should be taught with strong reference to the social contexts and purposes. For example, it is very different to write a report and a sales letter because of their divergent purposes (Flowerdew, 1993). Hyland (2007) argued that this knowledge of genre plays an important role in developing students' ability to connect language, content and contexts. In a similar vein, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) referred to this genre knowledge as 'an individual's repertoire of situationally appropriate responses to recurrent situations' (p. ix). While the genre approach assimilates the product approach with its emphasis on language system knowledge, its focus is on the variety of texts produced in different social situations, discarding the notion of 'paradigm', that is, a set of context-free assumptions against which students' work is gauged (Matsuda, 2003).

Table 1 summarizes the three approaches to ESL writing instruction with reference to their respective goals, learners' role, teachers' role and a typical teaching sequence.

The role of writing exemplars in the three ESL writing instructional approaches

From the perspective of curriculum materials development, a similarity that is shared among the three instructional approaches is the use of sample texts or writing exemplars. In a product approach, exemplars are provided by the teacher or textbook which serve as sample texts on which students model their writing. In a process approach, writing exemplars produced by students are used to facilitate peer review among students. In a genre approach, exemplars are carefully chosen by teachers to illustrate the communicative functions of linguistic features in relation to the purpose, context and target audience of a particular text-type.

'Exemplars' are defined as samples produced by students (and sometimes teachers) and used to 'illustrate dimensions of quality' (Carless, Chan, To, Lo & Barrett, 2018, p. 108); the use of exemplars is regarded as one of the promising ways to develop students' understanding of the ambiguous criteria of 'good work'. 'Exemplar-based instruction' is defined as the use of exemplars by teachers to illustrate 'a "quality continuum" of authentic student work [or sometimes student work modified by the teacher] to help them make judgements about what constitutes quality' (Scoles, Huxham & McArthur, 2013, p. 632; words in brackets mine).

While the use of exemplars in ESL writing instruction has been in place for a long time, how writing exemplars can be utilized to develop students' evaluative judgement of the quality of a text and understanding of assessment standards of high-stakes language tests (e.g. IELTS) has not been adequately researched and practiced. Recent assessment research in higher education

Table 1. The three traditional approaches to ESL writing instruction.

Approach	Goals	Learners' role	Teachers' role	A typical teaching sequence
Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students produce error-free writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imitate, copy, transform writing samples provided by the teacher and/or the textbook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain structural and grammatical elements using model texts Give summative, corrective feedback 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> T provides and explains a model text T gives out a writing question similar to the model text Ss complete the writing task within a given duration by modelling on the model text T grades Ss' writing and gives language-focused feedback Ss do corrections
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are exposed to the steps involved in drafting and redrafting of a piece of written work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce, discuss, reflect on, and revise successive drafts of a text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate students' discussions and reflections on drafts of a text Give timely, formative and descriptive feedback for students to improve on their drafts Focus equally on grammatical accuracy and content 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Prewriting Drafting (focus on coherence and quality of idea; peer assessment; formative feedback by T) Editing (focus on language accuracy) Publishing
Genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students write in the target language appropriately (with reference to the context, purpose of writing, and audience) and effectively (focusing on communicative functions of specific linguistic features) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize how language, content, and contexts work hand in hand Recognize how language is used to shape meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be explicit about communicative functions of grammar; grammar instruction is integrated into the analysis of texts and contexts rather than taught as a discrete component 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> T provides and explains a model text, focusing on the context, purpose, and audience of the model text T highlights the linguistic features prevalent in the model text, focusing on form and function Ss complete a writing question in the same genre

has found that understanding of assessment standards, which is a type of 'tacit knowledge', is 'difficult to transfer verbally or in writing' (Carless & Chan, 2017), but is best illustrated through the use of exemplars. Research has found that exemplar-based instruction in the higher education context helps clarify teacher expectations to students, simplify the process of assignment preparation (Carless, 2015), illustrate different approaches to tackle an assignment (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 2002), minimize students' assessment-related stress (Yucel, Bird, Young & Blanksby, 2014), and make students more confident in completing an assignment (Hendry & Anderson, 2013). From the perspective of teachers, the use of exemplars is a student-centered pedagogical approach which requires little preparation (Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher & McPhail, 2013).

In the context of ESL writing classrooms, exemplars can be used to exemplify a spectrum of quality (high, mediocre, low) described in the assessment standards or rubrics. In addition, the use of exemplars facilitates students' understanding of the assessment standards which are often

expressed in a generic and opaque manner by focusing on a specific writing genre or task. Through the analysis of and discussion about the exemplars, students are expected to 'engage in feedforward to better understand the disciplinary discourse and its expectations' (Scoles et al., 2013, p. 632). The use of exemplars in the writing classroom not only benefits instruction but contributes to standardizing teachers' understanding of the assessment standards, which is likely to lead to fairer and more objective grading.

Recent literature on the use of exemplars in the context of higher education has shown that exemplar-based instruction is implemented in various disciplines, including life sciences (Scoles et al., 2013), teacher education (Carless et al., 2018), design education (Hendry & Tomitsch, 2014) and animal science (Hendry, White & Herbert, 2016); nevertheless, how exemplar-based instruction can be implemented in ESL writing classrooms in higher education institutions remains under-explored. In this connection, this article reports on a textbook development project which adopts an exemplar-based instruction approach to be used by university English instructors to prepare students for IELTS writing. The goal of the textbook is to cultivate students' understanding of the assessment standards of the two IELTS writing tasks (academic module) through the design of exemplar-based dialogic and reflective activities.

Theoretical background

Exemplar-based instruction: Evidence from higher education research

Recent studies in higher education research document an array of exemplar-based instructional practices. Table 2 provides some examples.

O'Donovan, Price, & Rust (2008) proposed a framework comprising four approaches to developing students' understanding of assessment standards: (1) a 'laissez faire' approach, (2) an 'explicit' approach, (3) a 'social constructivist' approach, and (4) a 'community of practice approach'. In the 'laissez faire' approach, assessment standards are only communicated to students 'informally and serendipitously' (O'Donovan et al., 2008, p. 206). Such informal and serendipitous channels include teachers' feedback and informal discussions with teachers. An 'explicit' approach to sharing assessment standards to students refers to the use of 'learning outcomes, disciplinary benchmark statements' by teachers to articulate their expectations in order for students to improve their performance along this trajectory (O'Donovan et al., 2008, p. 207).

A 'social constructivist' approach to sharing assessment standards is a student-centered approach which aims to 'actively engage learners (and/or other stakeholders) in using and applying the standards enabling them to make meaning within their own personal and cognitive constructs' (O'Donovan et al., 2008, p. 207). The 'community of practice' approach accentuates the importance of collaboration among students when understanding and utilizing the assessment standards. In this approach, learning (in this case, the understanding of assessment standards) is regarded as a collaborative and interactive process rather than an individual process. To facilitate such collaborative learning environments, students must be mutually engaged through informal activities, develop a sense of joint ownership of the activities, and a shared repertoire of interactive practices (O'Donovan et al., 2008, p. 209).

Relating O'Donovan et al.'s (2008) framework to the textbook project that I am currently involved in, Table 3 describes the framework in relation to how exemplars can be used to promote students' understanding of IELTS writing assessment standards.

Tacit knowledge

One of the theoretical underpinnings of exemplar-based instruction is the notion of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge refers to aspects of knowledge that are difficult to transmit through

Table 2. Three approaches to using exemplars.

Approaches to using exemplars	Description
Inductive use of exemplars	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students are involved in judging the quality of the exemplars by using a marking rubric provided by the teacher. Teachers then explain the assessment standards in relation to the rubric and the exemplars (Hendry, et al., 2016).
Scaffolded use of exemplars	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students are involved in a pre-task (e.g. producing a part of a writing task reminiscent of the exemplar) before being introduced to high quality exemplars (Carless et al., 2018).
Dialogic use of exemplars	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students' opinions are elicited and divergent viewpoints are encouraged (Carless, et al., 2018).Students are encouraged to discuss their viewpoints with their classmates before teachers explicate the assessment standards (Hendry et al., 2016).Students are asked to verbalize their judgements and provide suggestions for improving the exemplars (Sadler, 2010).Students compare exemplars with their own work and reflect on their own performance through self-reflective questioning (Hounsell, 2008).

Table 3. A framework of approaches to sharing meaningful knowledge of assessment standards with students in higher education (adapted from O'Donovan et al., 2008).

	The 'laissez faire' approach	The 'explicit' approach	The 'social constructivist' approach	The 'community of practice' approach
Role of the teacher	Passive (wait for students to approach them)	Active (explicitly explain to students the assessment standards)	Active (lead dialogues with students to develop their understanding of assessment standards)	Active (facilitate dialogues amongst students to develop their understanding of assessment standards)
Role of the student	Passive (wait for opportunities to approach the teacher)	Passive (listen to teachers' explanations of assessment standards)	Active (engage in dialogues with teachers to better understand assessment standards)	Active (engage in dialogues with peers to better understand assessment standards)
The use of exemplars in IELTS writing	Exemplars distributed in the form of model essays without teacher input or discussions with students	Exemplars distributed in the form of model essays with teachers highlighting the strengths of the exemplars with reference to the IELTS writing descriptors	Essays and IELTS writing descriptors are distributed to students. The teacher guides students' understanding of the 'quality' of the exemplars through the use of a range of interactive and questioning strategies (e.g. Carless & Chan, 2017)	Essays and IELTS writing descriptors are distributed to students. Students discuss with peers in small groups (sometimes with the teacher's facilitation) about the 'quality' of the exemplars interactively.

speaking and writing (Sadler, 2010; Carless et al., 2018). There have been debates about whether it is possible to make tacit knowledge explicit, i.e. whether they are distinct types of knowledge or whether they exist on a continuum. Polanyi (1958, 1962) adopted the latter position and explicated the linkage between the 'articulated' and 'unarticulated' forms of knowledge. To Polanyi, the more complex and sophisticated understanding students develop regarding the knowledge and skills they initially acquired, the more likely students are able to 'articulate' such understanding using language. To deepen students' understanding in order to make the tacit knowledge explicit (to be able to articulate the knowledge), students must go through two developmental stages: a stage of 'systematic exploration' of 'examples' of such knowledge or understanding

using dialogic and reflective tasks and a stage where students gradually construct their own 'interpretative framework' about the knowledge (ibid, p. 78).

The notions of the 'tacit' and 'explicit' facets of knowledge were first thoroughly discussed in Polanyi's (1958, 1962) work on personal knowledge. To Polanyi, tacit knowledge is compared to 'connoisseurship', which 'can be communicated only by example, not by percept' (p. 56). In other words, it is not effective for teachers to explain tacit knowledge, such as the assessment standards of IELTS writing, in the forms of lectures and handouts, because the wordings and expressions used in the assessment standards remain abstract to students. Instead, it is argued that students acquire tacit knowledge through their active involvement in dialogic and reflective activities (e.g. discussion of writing exemplars with peers and teacher with reference to the assessment standards) (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010). Through such engagement, students begin to notice the essential features of what constitutes a good text by 'making visible some of the expert thinking and judgements of the teacher' (Carless et al., 2018, p. 1). With such a 'systematic exploration' of writing exemplars, students gradually develop their 'evaluative judgement', which is 'the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of oneself and others' and to articulate and discuss such understanding with peers and teachers (Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson & Panadero, 2018, p. 467).

Assessment as learning

Assessment as learning (AaL) is 'a subset of assessment for learning that emphasizes using assessment as a process of developing and supporting metacognition for students' (Earl, 2013, p.3). Adhering to the spirit of student-centeredness of assessment for learning (AfL), AaL aims to promote 'the active engagement of students in setting goals for their learning and growth, monitoring their progress toward these goals, and determining how to address any gaps' (Andrade, Huff & Brooke, 2012, p. 8). Instead of the teacher, students take up the role of 'the critical connector between assessment and their own learning' (Earl, 2013, p.3).

As mentioned by Earl (2013), to empower students to be 'critical connectors' between assessment and learning, their metacognition needs to be developed. 'Metacognition', which is often referred to as 'thinking about thinking', was first conceptualized by Flavell (1979) as a self-monitoring system of cognition which consists of four domains: metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experiences, goals/tasks and actions/strategies (Chong, 2017). Amongst the four domains, much educational research in the context of higher education has examined the knowledge domain of metacognition. Initially defined by Flavell (1979, p. 907) as 'knowledge or beliefs about what factors or variables act and interact in ways to affect the course and outcome of cognitive enterprises', the construct of metacognitive knowledge is expanded by later educational researchers to include three interrelated variables: person knowledge (learners' understanding of their learning styles, beliefs about learning, strengths and weaknesses), task knowledge (learners' understanding of the requirements and skills needed to complete a learning task), and strategic knowledge (declarative and procedural knowledge about the self-regulated strategies necessary to complete a learning task) (Wenden, 1998; Schraw, 2009).

The use of writing exemplars helps develop students' person, task and strategic knowledge. Students' person knowledge is enriched through engaging in activities associated with scaffolded use of exemplars, in which students first complete a writing task before being given an exemplar to analyze and compare with their own with reference to a set of assessment standards. In so doing, students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in the writing task. Regarding students' task knowledge, the use of exemplars offers tremendous help because students develop a more solid understanding of the task requirements (expressed in the form of assessment standards) through analyzing exemplars which illustrate different dimensions of quality. Lastly, students' strategic knowledge is burgeoned because they become more assessment

literate and develop a more accurate evaluative judgement vis-à-vis the quality of a written work. With a more acute evaluative judgment, students are able to self-regulate and monitor their writing process in a more effective manner through employing a range of metacognitive strategies.

Dialogic feedback

In the context of higher education, there has been an exponential growth in the number of assessment and feedback studies which conceptualize feedback from a constructivist and sociocultural point of view (Carless, 2016; Chong, 2018). Such conceptualization of feedback is often referred to as 'dialogic feedback'. Studies which examine dialogic feedback look into the various relational factors at work that influence how students interpret and utilize feedback. Such social factors examined in recent feedback studies in higher education include trust (Carless, 2013) and emotions (Molloy, Borrell-Carrió & Epstein, 2013), which positively or negatively affect students' motivation and confidence in interpreting and utilizing the feedback provided. Another research direction of dialogic feedback is closely associated with the use of exemplars. Adopting a discourse analysis approach, researchers attempt to analyze the teacher-students and student-student discussions of writing exemplars in order to identify the effective communicative moves which facilitate the development of students' understanding of assessment standards and evaluative judgement. For example, Carless and Chan (2017) reported how a teacher engaged in feedback dialogue with students and identified 16 dialogic moves which facilitate students' understanding of assessment standards.

The notion of dialogic feedback is built upon the tenet of sociocultural theory (SCT) (Figure 1). SCT suggests that human cognitive development takes place during social interaction. Originally developed by Vygotsky (1987), SCT and its related constructs have been increasingly applied in educational research to account for the various factors at work that influence effectiveness of pedagogical approaches (Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2015). According to Storch (2018), there are two connected constructs in SCT: (1) the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and (2) the notion of mediation.

Zone of proximal development (ZPD)

Vygotsky viewed the construction and development of learners' knowledge as being facilitated by the assistance of an 'expert'. ZPD is defined as 'the difference between what an individual achieves by herself and what she might achieve when assisted' (Swain et al., 2015, p. 17). ZPD is sometimes conceptualized as similar to Krashen's $i+1$ (Krashen, 1985), which suggests that language development occurs when the level of difficulty of language input is pitched slightly higher (+ 1) than the current language proficiency level of an individual (i). Nevertheless, ZPD and Krashen's $i+1$ differ because ZPD considers 'all dimensions of the activity' while $i+1$ focuses on language acquisition (Swain et al., 2015, p. 21). The comparison with Krashen's $i+1$ helps explain the nature of assistance that the 'expert' (the teacher) is expected to provide to

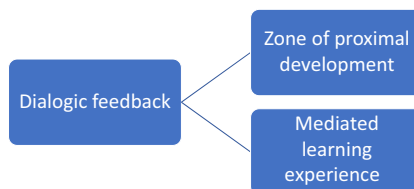


Figure 1. Dialogic feedback informed by sociocultural theory.

the 'novice' (the learner) – the assistance provided needs to be learner-centered and respond to the dynamic needs of the learners. Storch (2018) commented that such assistance provided to learners should be 'graduated and contingent' (p. 264). Applying to feedback practice, dialogic feedback provided to learners should be dynamic rather than static to scaffold the changing needs of the learners.

Mediated learning experience (MLE)

According to Vygotsky, 'mediation' entails that human activities and relationships are mediated by material and symbolic tools. The notion of mediation is further developed by Feuerstein and his associates in their theory of MLE. Originally developed to account for differences in cognitive development of children, MLE suggests that human cognition is not static but can be developed through meaningful interaction and instruction (Presseisen, 1992). Recently, MLE has been utilized as 'an intervention approach intended to improve learning' in educational and second language studies (Lee, 2014, p. 203).

Feuerstein, Rand & Rynders (1988) suggest four criteria for interactions to be qualified as mediated learning interaction: (1) *intentionality*, (2) *reciprocity*, (3) *transcendence*, and (4) *meaning*. Lee (2014; 2017) explains these criteria in relation to teacher's feedback:

- *Intentionality*: Feedback should be intentional in directing students' attention to particular areas (e.g. content, coherence, language) rather than giving feedback in an unfocused manner.
- *Reciprocity*: Feedback should be interactional rather than unidirectional in which students play a passive role.
- *Transcendence*: Feedback should facilitate 'feed-up' and 'feed-forward' in which students are able to transfer what they have gained from the feedback to their future writing tasks (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
- *Meaning*: Feedback should provide students with a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in a piece of writing and actions that can be done to close the feedback loop.

Informed by SCT, dialogic use of exemplars is regarded as a kind of MLE where students analyze the given exemplars with reference to the given assessment standards (intentionality), discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the exemplars with their peers and teacher (reciprocity), reflect on ways that the strengths and weaknesses of the exemplars could inform their own writing (transcendence and meaning). Through the provision of dialogic feedback on the given exemplars, teachers develop a better understanding of students' current state of knowledge of the assessment standards which helps teachers provide more effective scaffolding to expand students' understanding of assessment standards (zone of proximal development).

Figure 2 summarizes the pedagogical framework of exemplar-based instruction reported in higher education research and its theoretical underpinnings discussed in this section. In the next section, an ongoing grant project which aims to develop a textbook for teaching IELTS writing using an exemplar-based writing instructional approach will be introduced to illustrate how the pedagogical framework (Figure 2) informs the design of tasks in this textbook and the ways these tasks can be used. Despite not reporting any data at this stage, the introduction of this project sheds important light on how exemplars can be used in ESL writing classrooms, which remains an under-explored area in exemplar literature in higher education. In addition, different from current exemplar studies which focus on analyzing the spoken discourse of student-teacher dialogues, the emphasis of this project report is on how pedagogic tasks can be designed based

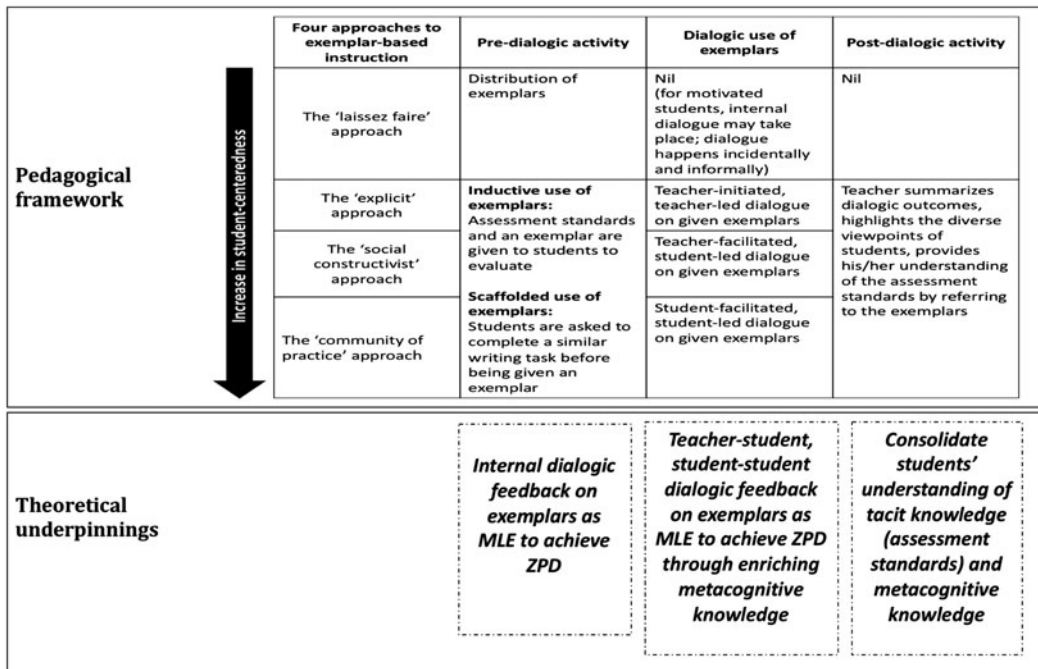


Figure 2. Pedagogical framework and theoretical underpinnings of exemplar-based instruction.

on writing exemplars to promote students' evaluative judgement and understanding of IELTS assessment standards.

A textbook project

Overview and theoretical underpinnings of the project

With the support of a Teaching Development Grant at The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK), a textbook is being written by the author and his colleague to prepare undergraduate students for the two tasks in IELTS writing examination (Task 1: data report and Task 2: essay). Several steps have been taken to ensure the effective adoption of research-informed, exemplar-based writing instruction in the textbook. Each content chapter in the textbook introduces students to one of the four assessment domains of IELTS writing, namely task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy; and facilitates students' understanding of these requirements through engaging them in tasks which analyze authentic exemplars written by university students.

In terms of ESL writing instructional approach, this textbook is grounded on the process writing and genre writing paradigms, which adheres to the pedagogical framework which informs the delivery of an IELTS writing course offered to all sophomores at EdUHK. In the IELTS writing course in which this textbook will be used, the course is informed by a process approach to writing instruction because it focuses not only on the language requirements of IELTS writing but also criteria pertaining to content and organization. Moreover, the course is designed to include individual consultation sessions to enable teachers to provide personalized and timely feedback to students regarding their written work. Equally important in the course is the combination with a genre approach to writing instruction. Since students at EdUHK are going to take the academic stream of IELTS, one of the foci of this writing course is to develop students' understanding of language features which contribute to 'academic writing' as a genre.

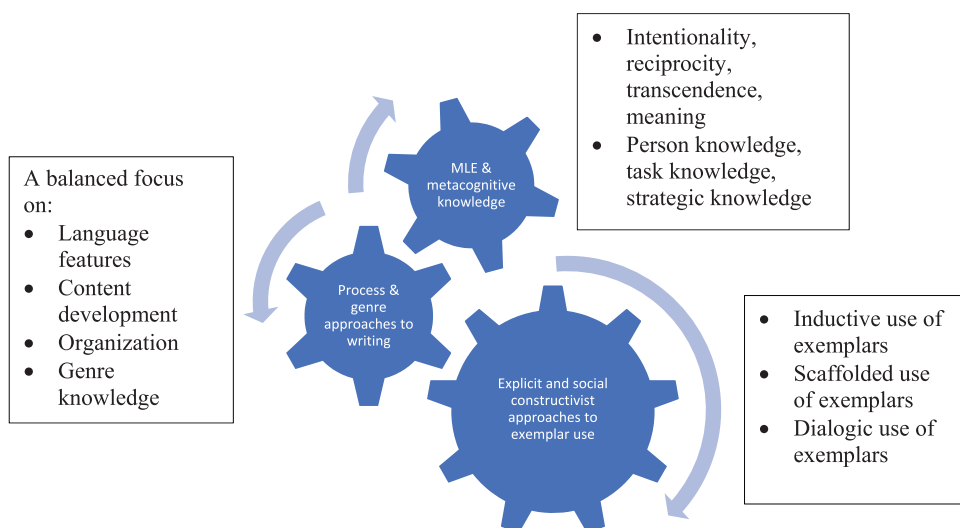


Figure 3. Pedagogical framework of the textbook.

With respect to the pedagogical framework proposed in this paper (Figure 2), this textbook adopts a combination of the ‘explicit’ and ‘social constructivist’ approaches of exemplar-based writing instruction. Figure 3 summarizes the pedagogical framework which informs the task design of this textbook:

Lesson plan of a sample unit on ‘lexical resource’

The following lesson plan (Table 4) serves as an example to provide an understanding of how the pedagogical framework in Figure 3 informs the design and delivery of the tasks in the textbook. Given the focus of this article on use of exemplars, and in order to appeal to a wider group of audience in the field of higher education, the focus will be on the three approaches of exemplar use, MLE and metacognitive knowledge rather than the ESL writing instructional paradigms. In particular, this lesson illustrates important aspects of exemplar use including peer review, feedback, role of teacher and learners.

Strategies for using exemplars in ESL writing classrooms

Developing writing assessment standards

A fundamental step towards using exemplars in the writing classroom is the development of a clear set of assessment standards or writing rubrics (Carless & Boud, 2018; Tai et al., 2018). Similar to the IELTS writing assessment standards, these descriptors can encompass different domains of writing (e.g. content, language, organization, style) with clear descriptive statements differentiating various levels of achievement. The creation of such rubrics should be informed by such considerations as the course objectives, the course content and learners’ needs. It is important that the assessment standards be written in an accessible way to students because students will be evaluating and analyzing writing exemplars using them. In addition, in situations where the rubrics are centrally-prepared, it is essential for the writing teacher to study the rubrics closely and develop a coherent understanding of the assessment standards. For teachers who are teaching students with a lower English proficiency, they are advised to provide the assessment standards in the first language of the students to facilitate their understanding of the statements and analysis of writing exemplars using the assessment standards.

Table 4. Lesson plan of a sample unit on 'lexical resource'.

Lesson Activity	Description of Activity	Theoretical underpinning
1 (30 mins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T asks Ss to read the "Lexical Resource" domain of the full IELTS writing descriptors (Task 2). • Ss can read 2-3 bands of descriptors (e.g. Bands 5-6) and circle the words they find important. • Based on the circled words, T asks Ss to discuss in groups/pairs the meaning of "Lexical Resource". • T elicits opinions from Ss. It is important at this point that the T does not reveal his/her opinion and directs Ss' attention to the descriptors for the key words identified. • T asks Ss to compare the key words they identified with the concept map in Activity 1. Explain new words shown in the concept map that are closely associated with those in the full descriptors e.g. "suffixes", "affixes", "conversion", "compound". • Ss are divided into three groups. Each group is assigned to complete one exercise: "Aspect 1: Variety of vocabulary", "Aspect 2: Difficulty of vocabulary", or "Aspect 3: Accuracy of vocabulary". • Individually, Ss complete the assigned exercise. Then, Ss sit with a partner in the same group to check answers or clarify misconceptions. • T instructs Ss to form groups of three with Ss who complete a different exercise. That means, each group should comprise Ss who completed the three exercises. • Ss in each group take turns to be a student-teacher to introduce the definitions and examples of key words in the concept map. • As a summary, T can check Ss' understanding of the key words by referring Ss to one of the exemplars in this chapter. To check Ss' understanding of variety of vocabulary, T can invite Ss to identify words that are formed using suffixes, prefixes, conversion, and compounding. To check Ss' understanding of difficulty of vocabulary, T can refer Ss to the "Headwords of the Academic Word List" PDF file and invite Ss to locate words that appear in AWL in the exemplar. To check Ss' understanding of accuracy of vocabulary, select a weaker exemplar from this chapter and invite Ss to identify errors related to collocation, spelling, and part of speech. 	<p>Inductive and dialogic use of exemplars</p> <p>Develop students' task knowledge</p> <p>Intentional feedback (focus on a particular standard of IELTS writing)</p> <p>Reciprocal feedback (T elicits feedback from Ss)</p>
2 (60 mins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T divides the class into groups of 3-4. Each group is responsible for completing one exemplar analysis activity in the chapter (Activities 2 to 4). • Taking up the role of assessors of writing, Ss from each group will present their analysis of the exemplars in the assigned activity, focusing on one aspect of "Lexical Resource" in the IELTS descriptors. • While each group is presenting, it is important for the T to act as a facilitator to elicit questions from the presenters and the audience to clarify misunderstanding and consolidate understanding. Again, it is of utmost importance to refer Ss to the actual descriptors and the concept map. Encourage Ss to use terms used in the descriptors and the concept map. 	<p>Dialogic use of exemplars</p> <p>Develop students' task knowledge</p> <p>Intentional feedback (focus on a particular standard of IELTS writing)</p> <p>Reciprocal feedback (Ss as generators of feedback, assessment dialogues between the T and Ss)</p> <p>Transcendent feedback (Ss apply their understanding of IELTS assessment standards to analyse the exemplar)</p>
3 (50 mins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this peer assessment activity, Ss are expected to put together the understanding they have developed regarding "Lexical Resource" for Task 2. For higher ability Ss, they can be asked to work 	<p>Dialogic use of exemplars</p> <p>Develop students' task knowledge</p> <p>Intentional feedback (focus on a particular standard of IELTS writing)</p>

(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

Lesson Activity	Description of Activity	Theoretical underpinning
	<p>individually on the task. These high achievers can also be encouraged to focus on the other domain, “Task Achievement”, which they learned in the previous chapter. For less-abled Ss, they can work with four groupmates, focusing on use of vocabulary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For group work, T can assign one S to be responsible for answering the questions of one paragraph (Activity 5). • At the end of each group’s presentation, T elicits opinions from the floor, encouraging both convergent and divergent opinions. • T can supplement by giving his/her own judgments. When giving his/her own opinion, T should always refer to the descriptors or concept map and make use of the terms in the descriptors and concept map. • At the end of the activity, T can ask Ss to rate the exemplar: low (Bands 4-5), average (Bands 6-7), or high (Bands 7+). • This activity can be easily turned into a workshop activity with fewer S participants. In a workshop setting, T can give out Exemplar 9.11 (Activity 5) but not the guiding questions. Instead, T guides Ss to analyse the exemplar by asking the guiding questions. To promote meaningful and student-focused interaction, T is encouraged to ask follow-up questions and deviate from the guiding questions when needs arise. 	<p>Reciprocal feedback (Ss as generators of feedback, assessment dialogues between the T and Ss)</p> <p>Transcendent feedback (Ss apply their understanding of IELTS assessment standards to analyse the exemplar)</p>
4 (40 mins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T selects one Task 2 question from the online question bank and gives Ss 40 minutes to complete the question. 	<p>Scaffolded use of exemplars</p> <p>Develop students’ task and strategic knowledge</p>
5 (Extended Blended Learning Task)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a post-lesson activity, T can set a discussion forum task on the learning management system (e.g. Moodle or Blackboard). • Ss are asked to post their writing done in Lesson Activity 4 and give brief comments (focusing on “Lexical Resource”) on a peer’s work. It is important to remind Ss to give evidence and suggestions when giving feedback e.g. quote specific words and expressions used by their peers. • The following guiding questions can help Ss write their feedback: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the student form new words through the use of prefixes? • Did the student form new words through the use of suffixes? • Did the student form new words through the use of conversion? • Did the student form new words through the use of compounding? • Did the student use academic vocabulary? • Did the student use collocations accurately? • Did the student spell words accurately? • Did the student use parts of speech accurately? 	<p>Scaffolded and dialogic use of exemplars</p> <p>Develop students’ personal, task, and strategic knowledge</p> <p>Intentional feedback (focus on a particular standard of IELTS writing)</p> <p>Reciprocal feedback (Ss as generators of feedback)</p> <p>Transcendent feedback (Ss apply their understanding of IELTS assessment standards to analyse their peer’s work)</p> <p>Meaningful feedback (Ss reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their writing)</p>

Adopting a reflective and dialogic approach

Informed by evidence-based practices of using exemplars in other disciplines of higher education, the creation of exemplar-based pedagogic tasks should be reflective and dialogic in nature (Hounsell, 2008; Hendry et al., 2016; Carless et al., 2018). Tasks can be designed to promote

students' reflective thinking by asking students to respond to evaluative questions. To facilitate students' understanding of different dimensions of quality in relation to the assessment standards, the evaluative questions should be phrased using the keywords found in the assessment standards. At the same time, students, when responding to such questions, should be asked to give examples from the exemplars as evidence. For instance, when students are asked whether new words are formed using prefixes, suffixes, conversion and compounding, students are asked to provide examples from the exemplars.

The design of dialogic tasks involves the setting of prompting questions which draw students' attention to particular features in an exemplar. The selection of the salient features in the exemplar should be based on the assessment standards in the rubrics. Referring to the sample lesson plan (Table 4), teachers can provide students with only the exemplar without the guiding questions. Instead, teachers can facilitate students' discussion on the exemplar by asking them these questions. In such situations, however, teachers may want to avoid having a 'scripted' dialogue by asking students questions following the suggestions strictly; a better approach is to be flexible and start with the open-ended question: 'What do you notice about the use of vocabulary in this exemplar?'. Teachers can then ask follow-up questions based on the students' responses.

Selecting and modifying writing exemplars to demonstrate a continuum of quality

With reference to Carless et al.'s (2018) reminder, exemplars are different from 'model essays' because they illustrate a continuum of quality (low, mediocre, high). It is a misconception of some teachers that students can only benefit from reading exemplars illustrating a high level of performance. In spite of the insights from high quality exemplars, it is equally important for teachers to select writing exemplars of different qualities to illustrate the differences and gaps between different levels of achievement. In this connection, writing exemplars need to be carefully selected to enable students to identify the similarities and differences between exemplars illustrating low, mediocre and high levels of competence. To facilitate students' evaluation of writing exemplars, three ways of modifying the exemplars can be considered: (1) varying the length of the exemplar to make students' evaluation more focused or including exemplars of different lengths (e.g. sentence-level, paragraph-level, essay-level), (2) for weaker students, sentences in an exemplar which are important can be highlighted or underlined so that students can concentrate on the salient features, and (3) wordings or phrases that may cause confusion or misunderstanding need to be revised in order not to get students distracted.

Designing exemplar-based tasks in accordance with the selected writing instructional approach(es)

Since this article concerns the use of exemplars in ESL writing classrooms, teachers should design exemplar-based tasks with reference to the writing instructional approaches they adopt (product, process, genre, or a combination). In a product approach, dialogic and evaluative tasks should focus on analyzing the linguistic accuracy and target grammatical features of exemplars. Teachers who adopt a process approach to writing instruction should include tasks which elicit students' opinions regarding both content and language. It is important for teachers to prompt students to give more formative and diagnostic feedback to the exemplars because of the 'feed forward' nature of feedback in the process approach. In other words, students should be able to give reasons to support your opinions and provide concrete suggestions for improvement. Lastly, in a writing classroom where a genre approach is adopted, teachers' questions should focus on the communicative functions of grammatical items, purpose of writing, context and audience (Hyland, 2015).

Conclusion

With the increasing discussion and conceptualization of 'evaluative judgment', 'tacit knowledge' and 'feedback literacy', numerous ways are proposed to develop such capacities in students in the higher education literature. One of the most frequently discussed ways is the use of exemplars. Although the affordances of using exemplars to develop these capacities have been affirmed, there is a dearth of discussions and reports on practical examinations of how exemplars are utilized and how exemplar-related tasks are designed in language education. This article addresses this gap by considering how the design of exemplar-based tasks is grounded on recent literature on exemplar use. Moreover, practical strategies for ESL university teachers to implement exemplar-based writing instruction are suggested. To frontline teachers, this article showcases how a textbook has been constructed to support student learning about writing using an exemplar-based instructional approach. This textbook development project sheds light on how the involvement of academics in curriculum materials development can contribute to staff development in the area of exemplar use, namely the development of assessment standards, the selection of exemplars, the design of dialogic and evaluative tasks based on exemplars.

An added contribution of this article is the in-depth discussions of the theoretical underpinnings of the use of exemplars, which include concepts drawn from philosophy e.g., 'tacit knowledge', language assessment e.g., 'assessment as learning', and educational psychology e.g., 'metacognitive knowledge' and 'mediated learning experience'. The pedagogical frameworks proposed in this article, which are based on the review of these theoretical constructs, can serve for future research on the use and effectiveness of exemplars, especially in language education in the higher education context.

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ORCID

Sin Wang Chong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4519-0544>

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