

Using explicit instruction in genre-based pedagogy in L2 writing: A personal insight

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Abstract

Explicit instruction technique helps to facilitate genre-based pedagogy in tertiary level L2 writing courses. This paper will focus more on pedagogical experiences rather than research and assessment perspectives. In the case of L2 teaching, explicit and implicit instruction techniques are not ‘either-or’ options, instead ‘but-also’ techniques for developing writing skills in L2. However, the decision of the focus on either of the method depends on the course context and the level of the students. This article will elaborate on how direct instruction helped in-course planning and student’s L2 writing strategy building. This paper will also highlight how using models minimized students’ knowing-doing gap, and finally, how teacher mediation and scaffolding created an opportunity for dialogue through feedback. Olson and Land (2007) and To and Carless’ (2015) pedagogical research findings support the author’s insights.

According to the National Institute for Direct Instruction (2015), direct instruction is “an explicit, carefully sequenced and scripted model of instruction”. It focuses on the theory that explicit instruction can significantly improve and accelerate learning. Its creators Siegfried Engelmann and Dr. Wesley Becker believe that adequately implemented explicit instruction can enhance student’s learning. After more than 16 years of active teaching, I cannot think of any teaching without direct/explicit instruction. The



debate between explicit and implicit instruction started since Reber's (1976) seminal work on cognitive learning (Rod, 1997). Based on research and my teaching experience, I can say that effective teaching of L2 incorporates a balance between both explicit and implicit instruction. However, depending on the course context, student's level, age, course objective, and outcome of the course, the teacher's focus on either of the instructional approaches may bring better results.

Before going to the main discussion, I would like to share a little background of my student group. They are undergraduate level diploma and certificate students. All of my students are international students who came to Toronto from all over the world. They also fulfilled their English Language Proficiency (ELP) requirement for admission, a 5.5 band score in Academic IELTS. The course I teach focuses on transferability skills in L2 writing across the genres. The content of the course includes summary writing, argumentative essay writing, APA formatting, blog writing, e-mail writing, and mind mapping. I followed the same pattern in teaching for most of the items; however, I will share how I used explicit instruction to teach argumentative essay writing. I will also share how I incorporated strategies and models to enhance student abilities and performances. An explicit instruction approach creates a scope for me to build a repertoire on the topic that I could use depending on the students' needs. I think the success of any course depends on proper planning and scaffolded implementation from a teacher's point of view. Rosenshine (1986) divides the explicit instruction model into 3 distinctive and successive phases: modeling, guided practice, and independent practice. Later on, Dubé and et al. (2013) express the explicit instruction in 7 stages: identify the activity goal, identify background knowledge, model demonstration, pose questions to students, guided practice, assessment and feedback, and autonomous practice. Notably, in many academic institutions today, time-bound, result-oriented L2 courses do not allow teachers to do much experimental and thinking outside of the box.

One of the most rewarding benefits of explicit instruction is, it creates an opportunity to build L2 writing strategies, primarily cognitive, metacognitive, and social (Oxford, 1990). Olson and Land's (2007) research also proved that "students receiving cognitive strategy instructions significantly outgained peers on holistically scored assessments of academic writing for seven consecutive years" (p. 267). For checking their prior knowledge, I asked the students to brainstorm with their peers and write down points that they already knew about the argumentative essay. I found almost all of my students had an idea that it either supports or opposes any statement or argument. However, many of them did not have any idea about proper outlining, for instance, how to write a thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting details, and examples. The notion of logos, pathos, and ethos was entirely new for them. From my prepared lesson plan, I explained all the details of the writing process of an argumentative essay. Initially, for some of them, all these steps were quite overwhelming, but eventually, when we practiced in class, they agreed it helped



them to plan how to proceed. As an English L2 learner myself, I cannot remember any of the courses I took that taught me how to write an essay. Of course, I had to write compositions for passing my coursework, but those included descriptive writing with prewriting and editing. They were very general and did not focus on any of the strategies. I could feel many of my students from China, Ukraine, India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines had the same kind of background experience. The sense of solidarity with my students helped me to figure out their challenges in understanding.

The next step of my explicit instruction was introducing annotated modeling. We, together in class, shared an ideal argumentative essay that contained all the criteria that we had discussed. I showed the outline, thesis statement, supporting details, and how the writer chose examples following logos, pathos, and ethos. Critiques of explicit instruction might argue I was spoon-feeding my students, but research suggests that “teachers need to provide systematic and explicit instruction in strategies used by mature readers and writers and help students develop declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge of these cognitive strategies, thereby building students’ metacognitive control of specific strategies” (Baker & Brown, 1984; Paris et al., 1983; Pressley 2000; cited in Olson & Land, 2007, p. 274). To and Carless (2015) also argued that “a useful teaching strategy is to help students understand the nature and characteristics of quality through discussing and analyzing exemplars of student work before tackling their own related task” (p. 746). Exemplars, or student writing samples, can be from the group I am teaching, and producing while learning or exemplars can be taken as samples from a previous student’s group who enrolled in the same course. While illustrating different steps of an argumentative essay and setting the rubric criteria for a high achieving score, students sometimes do not understand how those are incorporated in writing. According to Price et al. (2012), “criteria can seem highly abstract to students, whereas exemplars represent the concrete embodiment of standards and accordingly can support students in developing their assessment literacy” (as cited in To and Carless, p. 747).

I divided my class into five groups and provided them five different argumentative essays. I asked each group to read their given essays and locate the thesis statement, main arguments, and examples with supporting details. I found modeling helped my students to make a connection between what they already knew and what they had learned newly. After the group discussion, they exchanged their annotated readings across the groups. Before ending the class, I asked them to read all the argumentative sample essays uploaded on their course reading (through the learning management system) and annotate them individually. By doing this activity as homework, students were allowed to internalize all the strategies they had learned.

The next day when they were in class, after reinforcing their background knowledge, I gave five topics to five different groups. They analyzed the questions, researched on the internet, and came up with an outline,



including a thesis statement. Through this activity, they were already in the process of their writing, in the process of applying their knowledge about argumentative essays. While they were working, I went to each group and observed how they were supporting each other: making points, writing, rewriting, and editing their inputs. They were co-creating a text using their background knowledge and the current discourse pattern of an argumentative essay. I saw how an advanced student in a group was helping struggling students to take control of learning. The activity was a successful example of the Applebee and Langer's (1983) proposed model; they argued: "the novice reader or writer learns new skills in contexts where more skilled language users provide the support necessary to carry through unfamiliar tasks" (p. 168). Peer discussion is also highly recommended by To and Carless (2014); according to their research findings, "peer discussion and teacher guidance play a complementary role in engineering a supportive learning environment for positive transfer of insights. Peer discussion is useful in allowing students to generate ideas and negotiate meanings" (p. 746). I also consider this as the second stage of their taking the responsibility of writing. On the very first day, when they listened to the lecture, they identified the gap between their knowledge and the task's expectations. After teacher mediation and peer group discussion, they were collectively implementing the strategies they had learned.

After a specific time, I noticed they had understood the general outline, thesis statement, and connection with the examples and supporting sentences. To scaffold their higher-order thinking, I then introduced PAIBOC strategy (P=Purpose, A=Audience, I=Information, B=Benefit, O=Objection, and C=Context). After my explanation and modeling on PAIBOC, I asked them to discuss PAIBOC analysis of their essays in the group. This activity allowed them to figure out the overall tone and context of the writing.

After group discussion and scaffolding, it was time for them to write their argumentative essay. Students chose their topics from the option they were provided depending on their areas of interest. They practiced writing a thesis statement and outline in class as a teacher-guided individual practice. I asked them to submit their first draft online. I checked their essays and wrote feedback based on the criteria and rubric. The next day, we spent almost 2.5 hours discussing feedback. In my observation, students learned most from this activity. There were lively discussions about all the strengths and areas of improvement. It created an opportunity to open a personalized dialogue between students and me. Hendry et al. (2011) mentions that "it is the quality of the dialogue which seems to be a key factor in mediating students' engagement and development of ownership of usable insights from exemplars" (as cited in To and Carless, 2016, p. 748). Unfortunately, none of my students felt comfortable to share their writing as exemplars with the whole class; however, I used other examples to model with the class that they could read them later to see how students from former groups wrote argumentative essays. I also remembered the implementation of the same idea when I did an L2 learning course. Our professor uploaded previous students' writing samples/

exemplars/models on our course module. Our professor used those as implicit instruction, but I am using the samples following the explicit instruction approach. I think the student background and context of the course prompted us to take two different methods. It also establishes the fact that using the models is a tested strategy for developing L2 learning. Olson and Land (2007) argue that “regardless of the program used, instruction should include modeling, scaffolding, guided practice, and independent use of strategies so that students develop the ability to select and implement appropriate strategies independently and to monitor and regulate their use” (p. 274).

Explicit instruction undoubtedly is helpful and unavoidable for any teacher, but it has its limitations too. Despite using all kinds of strategies and modeling, an explicit instruction approach for L2 writing is dependent on much input. There is little scope for teachers for improvisation and creativity. Moreover, for new teachers, this approach might be too demanding. Student skill development and learning depend on the quality input of a teacher. In my class, I found some of my students felt overwhelmed, and they also struggled to transfer all these strategies in such a short period. The course was quite intensive, aiming to learn all the popular genres of writing. It was a 14-week, 72-hour course, 6 hours per week, excluding the midterm and final examination.

From my other teaching experience, I also found implicit instruction works better for both beginner level writers and even for creative writing for expert learners. Beginner level writers do not have to worry too much about the writing genre; instead, writing fluency and grammatical accuracy is expected from them. On the other hand, in high school and college-level writing courses, the focus is on genre-based L2 writing. In the Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines (2007) for teaching English writing, it is mentioned:

At the secondary level, teachers continue to teach and model effective strategies and skills, as well as provide appropriate scaffolding for students who are building skills and working towards independence. Students need opportunities to apply these skills and to write daily, in many forms and genres, for a variety of purposes and audiences, and within different time constraints (p. 17).

I closely observed (as my children are doing ENG3U and ENG4U) how English teachers of the Toronto District School Board follow direct instruction approach, modeling, and scaffolding for teaching writing essays. When I worked as a private high school teacher in Toronto, my colleagues and I also used a direct/explicit instruction approach to teach ESL and compulsory English. Implicit instruction theoretically sounds very useful, but in real-life classroom implementation, it is not practical. However, I think a combination of both methods would be more effective in developing students writing in L2.



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Author Bio



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