Arguments Against Providing Model Answers in the Writing Skills Classroom: The Singaporean Case

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Introduction

When teaching written communication skills, the long-standing practice has been to provide students with a model answer. In business writing classes, students are given model memos and letters covering the different kinds of situational needs. Engineering students study model reports. And in general writing skills courses, model paragraphs and essays are a staple input. This approach is likely to continue and even expand given the proliferation of software packages offering model letters for business people.

My experience in teaching communication skills for business has indicated that model answers generally work against the goal of the writing skills course, namely, to enable students to produce suitable prose pieces for different situations as they arise. In this paper I shall look at some of the reasons teachers still adhere to providing these template-type documents, assess the negative effects of such an approach, and then discuss an alternative approach.

Of course, stimulating creativity is only one aspect of improving writing skills. Students must learn to apply this creativity within the requirements and confines of particular business settings, as well as improve their grammar, expression, formats of letters, and so on. The objective of this particular approach is to get my Singapore students, who have developed in a rigid, non-creativity enhancing educational environment, to start thinking in creative terms rather than using learnt formulae when writing business letters.

The students I teach are in the First Year of a degree course in Business or Accountancy and are between the ages of 19 and 21. All their university education is conducted through English and they have a broad knowledge of business and general English. They all have A Level (final high school exam) English. Their course in Business Communication focuses almost exclusively on writing skills for the business world.

The pedagogical basis of my approach fits in with the didactic techniques developed by David Kolb (1984, 1991). This approach to learning focuses on what is called the Experiential Learning Model. In this, a critical incident or problem is presented for study

(in my case, the need to communicate something in the business world or other context). Various solutions are reviewed and manipulated to meet the specific needs (brainstorming and composition of letter, memo, etc.). From this experience the learner can deduce rules and patterns which, one hopes, will be internalized for effective handling of subsequent analogous situations. This is an investigative approach to language learning where students become "doers" rather than passive learners

Reasons For Popularity of Model Answer Approach

The mindset of students (especially Business, Engineering and other students), who do not have access to the focus on creativity that students in the Humanities tend to absorb, is such that they tend to want a "correct" answer for all their assignments. This is encouraged by the other subjects they study such as statistics, math, accountancy, and the sciences where such correct answers frequently do exist.

In Singapore, as in other parts of Asia, the structure of primary and secondary education is such that there is little emphasis on open-ended questions. This encourages the belief that there is a finite number of correct answers to any particular piece of assigned work. This situation gives the student little opportunity to explore ideas. This fact is borne out by the Cambridge Exams in English, for which Singaporean students commonly sit. The examiners' feedback to schools is frequently that the Singaporean students, though achieving high levels of accuracy, are generally unable to formulate ideas in answering and are reluctant or unable to express original responses to questions.

English is widely used in Singapore as the language of communication, and knowledge of the language is generally quite high. However, it is not the native or dominant language of the majority, who use Mandarin, another Chinese dialect, Malay, or Tamil as their first language. This fact further encourages teachers' and students' keenness for model answers.

Negative Impact of Using Model Answers

Many items of business communication are formulaic and the writer needs to do little more than follow the existing model and "fill in the blanks." However, certain writing tasks require some flair, for example, writing persuasive messages (e.g., sales letters) and composing sensitive or "bad news" messages. We need to make students aware that such acts of communication have different actors, different requirements, and a different desired outcome. It is essential to stress this to students so that they can become more sensitive to the varying priorities and approaches to adopt in each situation. This is a basic fact of communication. Providing models negates this reality in the students' psyche. If we provide model answers as a matter of course we perpetuate a "template" approach to

writing in which they feel they need only learn a template type composition and "fill in the blanks" with different names and facts. What happens is, we revitalize the belief that certain stock phrases are appropriate in all contexts. We, hence, encourage the use of clichés and the stock range of frequently outmoded phrases in writing. Expressions such as "It is company policy," "We regret to inform you," "We hereby enclose," and "We thank you for your support" are freely used and condoned. However, as practitioners of good communication, we know that such expressions have a low communicative value and reduce the positive impact of letters and other items of communication.

In writing, and particularly in business writing, we have to encourage students to be creative. They must develop some flair for dealing with the common requirements of the business world such as providing reasons in sales and persuasive type letters and buffering features in sensitive messages. We need to teach them strategies to inject vitality and impact into their writing. If we introduce a particular topic in writing skills via model answers incorporating good techniques, we rob students of the chance to assume responsibility for the creative process.

Halliday's (1985) functional grammar focuses on how using language involves constantly selecting from a series of options. This process of selection is influenced by the social and interactional features of the situation, and is hampered when the language users limit themselves to a few formulaic expressions. Students must be aware of the varying interactional realities that pertain in different situations.

It is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that non-native students need more guidance with their composition and hence provide them with instruction that denies the inherent creativity of language. However, precisely because these students are not native speakers of English, we need to extend their practice of writing creatively as much as possible. If we deprive them of the opportunity to enhance their ability to produce original prose, we are denying them a valuable learning experience and a professional skill.

Another drawback to giving model answers is the actual models themselves. A model answer is generally composed by one person whose style of writing substantially reflects one cultural context. Frequently in Singapore, as in other parts of Asia, the teacher of communication skills is a native English speaker from the UK, USA, or Australia. The memos, letters, and other sample writing they compose are based on a communicative approach and writing style that derive from the interactive norms of their native society. It is difficult if not impossible to incorporate the local usage patterns into these models. Communication styles are such deeply entrenched reflections of anthropological facts that they are not easy to eradicate. Hence, often the model answers are not well suited to the local cultural context. Similarly, the local Asian student using English may produce a

model answer that is less than a perfect mix of an English language, style and awareness of the locally sanctioned patterns of communication.

An Alternative Approach

In my experience, students can feel some frustration if the habitual model answers are not provided. They feel that the instruction is not solid enough and they often tend to look elsewhere—frequently to textbooks for these models. With my business communication students I stress that model answers cannot be reproduced, either fully or partially, in the final exam. In Singapore, the education system is very exam-oriented. Therefore, if my students understand that in the final exam, creativity rather than accurate reproduction is the key, they are less keen to want to rely on model answers.

I adopt the following general approach in the classroom. When introducing a particular area I want to cover, for example, writing a "bad news" memo to the employees of a company, I first discuss the scenario. I get the students to assess the situation from the points of view of both management and employees. They look at the conflicting desires in an example of a real-life situation. For instance, management wants to introduce a working policy that will be unpopular with employees. I make the goal, the anticipated responses, and the conflict of interest clear. Working in groups of three to five, the students then draft possible memos to use in the situation. They then write these on a transparency. I then encourage the students to go through each of the memos and identify the good and bad elements stating their opinions as to why one expression is effective or not, how it could be improved, and the kind of reader response it is likely to provoke.

In this way, the teaching process becomes one in which students must investigate so their role changes from that of passive learner to that of "doer" or investigator. This "change of status is emancipating and is a way of engaging learner autonomy" (Kenny, 1993, p. 217).

My Singapore students tend to include the phrase "We thank you for your support" in every letter regardless of whether there has been any support of any kind or whether thanking the receiver is appropriate. "Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any queries" is another that appears all the time. It is of course quite unsuitable when, say, writing to a superior for a favor.

At this point I take advantage of the opportunity to highlight and discuss any of the clichés or stock phrases that students are likely to have learnt in school and have incorporated into their memo in the belief that it looked "professional" or whatever. It is useful to explain the vacuousness of such clichés and point out why they contribute little to the vitality and impact of the memo. In a business skills course, avoiding clichés and

empty phrases assumes much more importance in the sense that business writing, especially sales letters, applications, and other kinds of persuasive writing, must engage reader interest.

Once we complete this discussion of better ways to compose a memo or letter, the students can then draft another memo incorporating what they have learnt. These can then be discussed in the same way as the original memo, but the new memo will almost certainly show much improvement in approach, style, and effectiveness. The exercise can be consolidated with a completely different scenario but which still involves the same kind of basic task, in this case, formulating a letter or memo giving bad news in the most positive, reader-friendly way possible, and aiming to reduce the negative impact as much as possible. If time permits, different scenarios can be set for practice writing. Other kinds of writing such as sales letters, rejection letters, letters of collection, and so on, can be introduced in the same way.

It has been suggested to me that sample answers could be presented but making it clear to students that they are only possible ways to deal with the particular situation they were composed for. However, I would argue that any kind of answer offered by the teacher is received by students as the "right" one. Insisting that they are just samples rather than "correct" answers would have little impact on the students' desire to use them as models.

Some teachers may argue that it might be good to provide model answers after the students have had some initial practice without access to them. However, providing any kind of answer that will be interpreted by students as "better" or "correct" will diminish their sense of responsibility to create for themselves. Even if they do not learn the model in its entirety, they will inevitably be tempted to use parts of it, and possibly in inappropriate contexts. The best way to drive home the message that specific responses have to be created for each specific situation is to eliminate all use of "good" answers (other than those produced by the students themselves as part of the exercise).

We need to boost students' confidence in their ability to compose their own work. The essence of this is that we must give them the chance to practice. This experience will enhance their sense of their own capacity to compose prose to suit a particular given context without relying on learnt phrases.

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Valerie Goby (PhD in Sociolinguistics) has taught in both Asia and Europe. She has published widely in language, linguistics and communication studies, and currently teaches Business Communication at Nanyang Business School in Singapore.

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