Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Second Language Writing

Impact of source texts and prompts on students' genre uptake

Ryan T. Miller [a,*], Thomas D. Mitchell [b], Silvia Pessoa [b]

[a] English Department, Kent State University, P.O. Box 5190, Kent, OH 44242, USA
[b] Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, P.O. Box 24866, Doha, Qatar

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Argumentative writing is a vital but challenging genre for university students, particularly second language writers. While much is known about different factors that make it challenging, in this paper, we focus on an underexplored factor: the intertextual relationship between source texts, prompts, and student writing. We analyze student writing in a first-year history class at a branch campus of an American university in the Middle East, and more specifically, how source texts and writing prompts condition whether students produce the expected argument genre. We draw from two perspectives on genre: Rhetorical Genre Studies, with its focus on the highly contextualized nature of writing, provides a useful lens through which to view intertextuality; Systemic Functional Linguistics, with its explicit focus on language, provides tools for studying writing development in school genres. Results suggest that source texts that do not contain an explicit argument and prompts that ask for students' opinion may facilitate students' uptake of argument. The study has pedagogical implications for improving alignment between an instructor's goals and expectations, assignment design, and the writing students produce.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Learning to write arguments is a crucial part of students' induction into university-level work (Wu & Allison, 2005) and writing argumentatively is "one of the greatest challenges many English language learners (ELLs) are likely to face" (Hirvela, 2013, p. 67). This is in part because L2 university writers may still be in the process of "learning the valued genres of academic communication" (Tardy, 2009, p. 4). Thus, even when these students are expected to produce arguments, they do not always meet this expectation. This gap between the instructor's expectation and the writing that students produce may stem from varied and overlapping factors, including lack of academic preparation (Allison, 2009; Harklau, 1994, 2001; Hirvela, 2013), organization of ideas (Coffin & Hewings, 2004), balancing authoritative voice with inclusion of multiple perspectives (Coffin & Hewings, 2004; Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2014), and justifying claims with appropriate evidence (Silva, 1993). In this paper, we focus on an underexplored factor: the intertextual relationship between source texts, prompts, and student writing. We analyze student writing in response to source texts and prompts in a first-year history class at a branch campus of an American university in the Middle East. Our analysis demonstrates how source texts and writing prompts condition whether students produce the expected argument genre.

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: rmill129@kent.edu (R.T. Miller), tmitchel@andrew.cmu.edu (T.D. Mitchell), spessoa@cmu.edu (S. Pessoa).

In higher education, students often write from source texts and in response to prompts (Hirvela & Du, 2013; Horowitz, 1989). The relationships among a source text, prompt, and student writing can be thought of as a type of intertextuality, or the relationship between two or more texts. Because university-level writing involves not only putting forth one's own ideas, but representing those ideas in relation to prior discourse in discipline-specific ways, intertextuality is an important aspect of academic writing (Tardy, 2009). Research on intertextuality between source texts and L2 writing has mostly focused on textual borrowing, plagiarism, and summary writing (e.g., Pecorari, 2003), with limited focus on how features of source texts influence student writing, particularly argumentative writing. Research on intertextuality between writing prompts and L2 writing has mostly focused on the context of standardized assessment (e.g., Horowitz, 1986, 1989), with limited focus on classroom contexts. Very little attention has been paid to the interplay between source texts, writing prompts, and student writing.

To study how source texts and prompts condition student writing, we draw from two perspectives on genre that have seldom been combined: Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS; Freedman & Medway, 1994) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). RGS, with its focus on the highly contextualized nature of writing, provides a useful lens through which to view intertextuality. Specifically, we use Freadman's (1994, 2002) notion of uptake—how one genre invokes another genre in response—to consider how source texts may influence the genre students produce (i.e., their uptake). We also draw on Bawarshi's (2003) application of uptake to the conditions that writing prompts create for student texts. We extend this work on uptake into an L2 setting, while also adding detailed linguistic analysis of the genres students produce.

For this analysis, we draw on SFL because of its explicit focus on language and the tools it provides for studying writing development in school genres. From an SFL perspective, genre is a "staged, goal-oriented, social process" (Martin, 1992, p. 505). We use Coffin's (2006) typology and linguistic descriptions of history genres to closely analyze student writing. Although SFL approaches to genre have been widely applied in the study of history writing, this has primarily been at the elementary and secondary school levels (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Llinares & Pascual Peña, 2015; Martin, 1992; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteíza, 2004), not in university settings.

In the next section, we discuss prior research on intertextuality between source texts and student writing, and between prompts and student writing. Then we describe in more detail how we draw on the RGS and SFL perspectives on genre. Finally, we introduce school history genres, with a focus on the Argument genre.

2. Literature review

2.1. Intertextuality, source texts, and prompts

University students in many disciplines are frequently expected to write arguments from source texts (Davis, 2013; Hirvela & Du, 2013; Horowitz, 1989; Keck, 2006, 2014; Shaw & Pecorari, 2013). Writing from source texts can be challenging as it requires students to engage in "complex reading and writing activities and make contextualized decisions as they interact with the reading materials and the assigned writing tasks" (Hirvela & Du, 2013, p. 87). Much of the literature on intertextuality between source texts and student writing has focused on textual borrowing and plagiarism (see, e.g., Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Keck, 2010; Pecorari, 2003; Plakans & Gebril, 2013; Shi, 2012; Weigle & Parker, 2012; Wette, 2010). However, fewer studies have looked at how specific aspects of the source text affect student writing. Keck (2014) showed that expository texts, more than narrative texts, tend to generate greater textual borrowing among both L1 and L2 students, resulting in more texts that mirror the sequence of ideas in the source text. Yu (2009) found that a number of aspects of source texts—including macro-organization, frequency of unfamiliar words, topic familiarity, and length of source texts— affected students' ability to summarize the source text.

Another form of intertextuality common in higher education is writing in response to prompts. Much of the research on prompts has considered their role in language tests (e.g., Hamp-Lyons & Mathias, 1994; Hinkel, 2002; Horowitz, 1986, 1989; Kobrin, Deng, & Shaw, 2011; Kroll & Reid, 1994), with less attention to the use of prompts in classroom writing assignments or how they affect student writing (Oliver, 1995; Reid & Kroll, 1995). Oliver (1995) found that the quality of student writing is affected by the types and amount of rhetorical specification of topic, purpose, and audience in the prompts. Studies focusing on task complexity have suggested that more complex prompts may encourage students to write more effectively by, for example, producing more accurate writing (e.g., Kobrin et al., 2011; Kuiken & Vedder, 2008; Ong & Zhang, 2010).

Specifically addressing the use of prompts in history classes is the work of Coffin (2006) and Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015). According to Coffin (2006), "Unless a writing task/exam question is formulated in clear, unambiguous terms and/or supported with supplementary guidance and support, students may produce a genre that is not the 'target' genre expected by a teacher" (p. 169). Consequently, it is important that teachers deconstruct the goals of the task with the students, are consistent in the wording of the prompt, and make it explicit "that different genres are given greater weight and value in different contexts" (p. 169). Llinares and Pascual Peña (2015) investigated use of oral prompts in history classes and found that the types of questions teachers ask can affect the genres students produce in classroom discussions.

2.2. RGS and SFL approaches to genre

To study how source texts and writing prompts condition student writing, we draw from two perspectives on genre: RGS and SFL. The RGS approach views genre as social action (Miller, 1994) and focuses on socio-rhetorical aspects of genre such as