The Role of Progymnasmata in English Writing Class

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This paper aims to suggest an English writing class lesson in the rhetorical approach method through using progymnasmata activity. The background of study is from ancient rhetorical writing exercises especially for beginner writers. Specifically it focuses on imitation and paraphrasing as a writing activity variation. The approach of study is to provide a writing activity through imitation and paraphrasing which can be viewed as a learning style and structure. The current teaching of the writing community has hardly addressed the rhetorical approach in teaching writing. From the rhetorical approach, the study questions the role of progymnasmata (which means elementary exercises) and its effectiveness in writing class. As a sequenced writing exercise, that begins with imitation and/or a simple paraphrase and ends with complicated and/or sophisticated exercises, the author hypothesizes that progymnasmata can be applied to a writing activity. In an effort to suggest a writing activity the author introduces one progymnasmata, fables, to be integrated into the writing exercises and used to cultivate mental activity. The author shows writing lesson activities of how to imitate and paraphrase the original fables. Finally, the pedagogical implication and its challenges are suggested and brought into teaching the writing class.

I. INTRODUCTION

Considering English as a foreign language (EFL), writing is no easy task. Numerous scholars have studied how to teach EFL or ESL writing more effectively (Davies & Pearse, 2000; Friend, 1971; Hedge, 2000; Hyland, 1)

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They also tried to develop and explain models of teaching writing. When looking at a writing product including other language skills, it is evaluated based on the learner’s performance. On a performance base of language learning, an EFL writing is “driven primarily by the pragmatic concerns of the classrooms in which it is taught (Carson, 2001, p. 191).” It implies that writing ability is developed in formal instructional settings. And the development of skill is highly related to educational practices.

Supporting education practices in formal instruction settings, EFL writing teaching, which applied various models and approaches in Korea, has been reported (Choi, 2012; Choi, 2013; Ji, 2012; Pen, Park, & Lim, 2013; Song, 2004). Among these studies, Choi (2012) studied the effects of two types of paraphrases practices in formal instruction settings and the study showed positive effects of the practice on performance. Another study (Ji, 2012) showed the improvement of the writing skills through paraphrasing instruction. Likewise, a high degree of research in teaching writing is produced consistently especially applying activities, approaches, and models. In relation to the instructional approach, Hedge (2000) argued that the methodology for teaching writing in ELT classrooms in the 1990s shifted from traditional approaches to a conference approach which is involved a writing workshop. No matter how the methodology made departures from traditional approaches, teaching writing still requires students’ practice in educational settings. Seeking various writing class lesson materials, it would be acceptable to borrow from the ancient rhetorical approaches.

The present study aims to suggest an English writing class lesson material in rhetorical approach through using a progymnasmata activity. This paper provides principles for teaching writing which are used to evaluate teaching and learning activities according to Nation (2009). He suggested four principles: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Progymnasmata is introduced as a writing exercise which means a sequence of writing exercises that begins with imitation and/or simple paraphrase and ends with complicated and/or sophisticated exercises. A progymnasmata, fables, is introduced to integrate writing exercises and to cultivate mental activity.
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The limit of this study is that the empirical evaluation of writing exercises is beyond the scope of the present study. The adequacy of hypotheses, research methodologies, and logical argumentation are necessary, thus the emerging data from the empirical research will necessitate through a series of research.

II. PROGYMNASMATA AND TEACHING WRITING PRINCIPLES

To provide a good range of opportunities for learning especially teaching writing course, and evaluating teaching and learning activities, Nation (2009) suggested four principles. The author argues that these principles can be related to what progymnasmata’s purpose is on writing exercises followed mainly by Kennedy’s (1994) work.

1. Progymnasmata

In the ancient times about from the fourth century, rhetoric teachers preferred to use a set of exercises for teaching writing and speaking called progymnasmata. It was used for composition exercises. It was considered one of teaching methods for teaching writing and speaking. Murphy (1987) explained the progymnasmata is "a graded series of exercises in writing and speaking themes. Each succeeding exercise is more difficult and incorporates what has been learned in preceding ones (p. xxxi)." More, Kennedy (1994) wrote, it is "sequenced...begin with simple paraphrases and end with sophisticated exercises in deliberative and forensic rhetoric. Each successive exercise uses a skill practiced in the preceding one, but each adds some new and more difficult composing task (p. 385)." Progymnasmata is found in Quintilian which introduced it as routinely used in rhetorical exercise for composition. It was translated over centuries. In ancient Greece and Rome, a grammarian who was a teacher asked students practice imitating and elaborating on fables, tales, and proverbs which were most common in progymnasmata. Imitating in progymnasmata may look artificial or formulaic yet, Kennedy (1994) argued that "the directions for amplification that accompany some of them are meant to be freely interpreted (p. 385)." That
is, the arrangement can be free when exercising with, for example, fables. Simply put, progymnasmata begins with elementary exercise using already existing texts such as fable, tale, chreia, or proverb through retelling, imitating, paraphrasing, and amplification then more on to the sophisticated texts or create original texts such as writing a thesis.

The twelve most commonly were used progymnasmata are (Murphy, 1987, p. xxxi):

1. Fable: Retelling a fable through imitation
2. Tales: Retelling an episode through imitation and paraphrasing
3. Chreia: Amplification of a moral theme
4. Proverb: Amplification of its meaning
5. Refutation and confirmation: Giving the opposite views on a theme
6. Commonplace: Argue for or against a general virtue or fault
7. Encomium: Eulogy of a person or thing
8. Comparison: Compare things or persons
9. Impersonation: Write a character of a given person
10. Description: Vivid presentation of details
11. Thesis: Argue for or against an answer to a general question
12. Laws: Argue for or against a law

Even though progymnasmata was used by the rhetoric teachers and seemed to be outdated or not comtemporary for writing exercises, in this study, the author adapts two features which distinguish and basic features of progymnasmata in writing lessons and activities. The first feature of progymnasma is habitual exercise by repeating them. The next feature is skill building exercises through imitating and paraphrasing.

To support progymnasma’s effectiveness in writing class, it requires principles which evaluate writing teaching and learning. The next section provides four principles following Nation’s (2009) research.

2. Teaching Writing Principles and Progymnasmata

One of the aims of teaching writing is to make sure that learners have
ample opportunities for learning. As get a good range of opportunities, the writing activities need to be evaluated with basic criteria. The following is borrowed from what Nation (2009, p. 93) suggested as principles for teaching writing and the author lays out a logical basis for progymnasmata.

He suggested four categories ranked as the most important principles: 1) meaning-focused input, 2) meaning-focused output, 3) language-focused learning, and 4) fluency development.

(1) Meaning-focused input: It emphasizes a learner’s experience and knowledge. If a learner prepares through previous experience and is familiar with the topic, writing will be a successful and meaningful writing exercise. Here, the progymnasmata uses, for example, fable, such as one of Aesop’s, which is commonly used for the exercise. No doubt both first language writers and second language writers are familiar with Aesop’s fables. Topics of Aesop’s fable are already part of the learner’s knowledge.

(2) Meaning-focused output: It focuses on providing ample opportunities for writing. It includes different kinds of writing. Learners are asked to practice a range of different genres of writing. Another point of this principle is that learners should be interested in what they write and have felt a success in their writing. Bringing progymnasmata’s purpose here, it asks learners exercise different types of writing, as the author provided in the above section of this article. Imitation writing practice may bring an accomplished feeling since learners can complete the writing even with slight changes of text.

(3) Language-focused learning: This points out that learners need to know the writing process. All levels of writing learners are asked to be conscious of the parts of the writing process which are commonly known as considering goals, gathering ideas, organizing ideas, writing and reviewing, and editing. Progymnasmata is a sequenced and guided writing exercise used by a writing teacher. Learners can be easily guided in their writing process as the writing teacher guides them using different progymnasmatas.
(4) Fluency development: It emphasizes “fluency development can occur through repetitive activities and through working with easy, familiar material (pp. 94–95).” Grabe and Kaplan (1996) also suggested fluency development. It makes a close connection with what progymnasmata asks of learners. One of the prominent features of progymnasmata is repetition to make a writing habit. Progymnasmata supplies learners with a series of graded exercises and then repeats them. More, it is a skill–building exercise which requires ample exercises. Using easy and familiar material such as an Aesop’s fable through repetitive activities, learners may develop their fluency in writing.

In this section, the author argues how progymnasmata works with teaching writing principles in terms of evaluating teaching and learning activities. Given the bases of works of progymnasmata and teaching writing principles, writing lesson material can be created which helps learners improve their writing skills. The next section provides a skill–building writing activity using progymnasmata.

III. PROGYMNASMATA IN THE WRITING CLASS

Writing in an English language class may be managed in different ways for different purposes. The aim of this study is to suggest a writing activity through progymnasmata exercises especially using fables. These activities are mainly guided compositions which use progymnasmata in writing exercises. They can be useful to clarify grammar, to give a change of activity in a lesson, or to give extra practice. Of course, writing practice needs to include developing higher–level writing skills which means the ability to do writing tasks with intermediate and advanced proficiency. However, this study aims to start at lower levels.

As Davies and Pearse (2000) stated, “good writing skills usually develop from extensive reading, some specific training, and a good deal of practice (p. 96).” To support learners, this study provides them with extensive reading such as Aesop’s fables, some specific training like sequences and
repetitive exercises, and a good deal of practice as in progymnasmata. In this study, the author does not try to confirm the writing theories that Grabe (2001), Grabe and Kaplan (1997), and Hayes (1996) studied trying to explain performance outcomes. Their study was to see "how it is carried out as a set of mental processes; how it varies across tasks, settings, groups, cultures; how it is learned; and how it leads to individual differences in performance (Grabe, 2001, p. 41)." These are beyond of this study’s purpose.

The next explains how to use progymnasmata in writing activity as teaching ideas. Even though a teaching activity is borrowed from progymnasmata, the activity is different from what rhetoric teachers used. The author took the concept of progymnasmata and suggests writing lesson activities similar to progymnasmata. Before suggesting the following activity, the author should provide the empirical research data. However, the point of this study is to hypothesize the effect of writing in terms of using progymnasmata, especially applying imitation and paraphrasing.

Fables are fictitious stories and their purpose is to teach moral lessons. Characters usually imitate how people behave and set out moral lessons to the readers. One well-known fables was written by Aesop: The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse. It was written thousands of years ago, yet still this fable influences many people in all cultures. Fables are popular among children, of course, and that is why ancient rhetoric teachers asked their younger aged students to imitate of fables of Aesop as elementary progymnasmata (Kennedy, 1994). It is not only for young learners but older learners can paraphrase the fables of Aesop and create their own stories to develop advanced writing skill. However, for second language learners even the imitating of fables can be challenging.

Imitation and paraphrasing are the most popular rhetorical exercises. R. Brooke (1988) suggested the effect of imitation in writing. He tried to answer to a question about how imitation helps learners to learn to write. He argued that "when a student successfully learned something about writing by imitation, it is by imitating another person, and not a text or a process. Writers learn to write by imitating other writers, by trying to act like writers they respect" (p. 23). He concluded that imitation can be as a learning and
teaching strategy. Gorrell (1987) also argued that “as to transfer to other writing, the imitation of particular written sentences, paragraphs, and larger pieces is no more restricting” (p. 55). He explained that basic writers are deficient in reading and writing backgrounds so imitation can enter the process as an enabling function which provides a structure for the expression of ideas and serves as the vehicle for development of ideas. My position is similar to what Gorrell (1987) argued, that imitation writing exists for variation and the student writers will become more original as they engage in creative imitation. Also, “imitation can be viewed as a shortcut to learning new styles and structures, giving the learner a wider choice among alternatives for expressing individual ideas” (p. 55).

Fables are usually quite brief, mostly descriptive, and written as dialogues. It helps one practice elementary writing exercises. It is helpful to choose more familiar or frequently read fables by the learners when doing progymnasmata writing exercises. The following is an excerpt of *Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* by Aesop (Translated by Jacobs, 2006).

Now you must know that a town mouse once upon a time went on a visit to his cousin in the country. He was rough and ready, this cousin, but he loved his town friend and made him heartily welcome. Beans and bacon, cheese and bread, were all he had to offer, but he offered them freely. The town mouse rather turned up his long nose at this country fare, and said, “I cannot understand, cousin, how you can put up with such poor food as this, but of course you cannot expect anything better in the country; come you with me and I will show you how to live. When you have been in town a week you will wonder how you could ever have stood a country life.” No sooner said than done: The two mice set off for the town and arrived at the town mouse’s resident late at night.

Before conducting imitating exercises, learners must be clearly instructed about plagiarism. Learners need to understand the differences between plagiarizing and imitating writing exercises. However, Gorrell (1987) clearly mentioned that “imitation is not plagiarism” (p. 55).
To begin an imitating writing exercise, learners are asked to read a suggested fable several times in order to connect with what they already understood. It is a meaning–focused input process. It helps to remind learners of experience and knowledge. Learners will understand the lesson of this fable is comparing city and country life and it implies one should live in peace rather than in fear. Then, the learners find animal characters and change them into human characters. Once the learners are ready to change the pronoun then the human character’s gender can be changed like the italicized in the following:

Now you must know that a town girl once upon a time went on a visit to her cousin in the country. She was rough and ready, this cousin, but she loved her town friend and made her heartily welcome. Beans and bacon, cheese and bread, were all she had to offer, but she offered them freely. The town mouse rather turned up her long nose at this country fare, and said, "I cannot understand, cousin, how you can put up with such poor food as this, but of course you cannot expect anything better in the country; come you with me and I will show you how to live. When you have been in town a week you will wonder how you could ever have stood a country life." No sooner said than done: The two girls set off for the town and arrived at the town girl’s resident late at night.

Then, the learners choose different food or change the food to other things than what is in the text and rewrite the text. Depending on the learner’s proficiency level, they may go on to more imitating exercises while keeping the original text. Doing several imitating writing exercises can be a meaning–focused output while providing ample opportunities to learners. This exercise also includes language–focused learning through copying models, and doing repetitive writing exercises. As learners rewrite several times, even though they change certain things from the original text, fluency development can occur through repetitive practice and familiar material.
Paraphrasing can be quite a challenging task for second language writers because unsuccessful paraphrasing can result in unintentional plagiarism. Again, the paraphrasing a fable activity also requires learners understand plagiarism. Paraphrasing is explaining and interpreting someone’s ideas while using the learners’ own words. It requires a higher cognitive skills. Nonetheless, it helps to practice writing effectively as it also helps to restate, condense, or clarify someone’s ideas. There are suggested effective paraphrasing strategies however, this study does not aim to look into them. Instead, it tries to suggest a writing activity through progymnasmata.

To begin a paraphrasing writing activity, let learners reread the original fable of Aesop, The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse. Ask them to look up with any words they do not recognize. However, after the imitating exercise, presumably most learners will be familiar with the story’s meaning. Then, learners will be asked to tell the fable to their classmates or the teacher verbally. Lower proficiency level learners may be asked to write simply, such as:

A town mouse visited a country mouse. He ate some poor food and wanted to show the country mouse a city. But the country mouse didn’t like the city because it was dangerous. The country mouse wanted to live in the country because it is quiet and peaceful.

For a more advanced paraphrasing activity, learners may put more detail in the text such as different events in the story. Like:

Country Mouse invited her cousin Town mouse to the country. Town mouse did not enjoy the country and wanted to go back to the city. Town mouse invited Country mouse to go along with her. Country mouse enjoyed the food and surroundings until she had to hide because of a sudden noise. Country mouse was scared and decided to return to her home in the country. She wanted to live in peace with her poor food.
Meaning-focused input is achieved using the paraphrasing activity as learners, who already knew the story of the fable and had writing experience by doing imitating writing, practice descriptive writing and dialogues which most fables include. For language-focused learning, Nation (2009) pointed out that “learners should have conscious strategies for dealing with parts of the writing process” (p. 94). Doing paraphrasing requires learners to think about the writing process. In a certain degree, paraphrasing may not an easy task for learners. However, it is a mental activity which requires thinking carefully and creatively. Nienkamp (2001) argued that all decision making processes use an internal rhetoric when a writer is trying to decide how to write the next sentence. While it seems like the internal rhetoric is not closely related to the paraphrasing activity, the author tries to highlight the importance of the internal mental activity while paraphrasing.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study aims to suggest an English writing class lesson material through the rhetorical approach using progymnasmata activity especially through fables. Teaching writing requires one to make learners understand that “a written text has to create context and make the references and connections of the messages clear through the language itself (Davies & Pearse, 2000, p. 90).” In relation to this, writing requires more grammatically complete sentences, and extended vocabulary even though there are more considerations for successful writing. To do this, it takes time to reach the complexity of writing that learners rewrite, correct drafts, and edit. Obviously, writing classes need to provide more effective activities that learners have ample opportunities. It seems to be that the practical way for writing advancement is for writing teachers to use an effective activities in order to develop writing skills. EFL writers, unlike the first language writers in English, need more exposure to grammatically complete sentences, and a wide range of vocabulary in a text. Stretching this idea, teaching writing needs to develop lesson material which integrates the specific needs of the learners.
In order to develop lesson material, there needs to be certain teaching writing principles. To evaluate teaching writing, four principles were borrowed from Nation (2009) in this present study. They are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. The author introduces a progymnasmata exercise in writing classes based on the above four principles. Progymnasmata was used in the ancient by rhetoric teachers when they taught speaking and writing. It was well sequenced and organized because it trained learners to become effective speakers and writers. Fables, for example, in progymnasmata were already existing texts such as Aesop’s fables and they can be used for writing exercises through imitating and paraphrasing. Doing progymnasmata in writing exercise, learners are asked to bring their experience and knowledge to their writing such as remembering Aesop’s fables and using them to meet the meaning-focused input principle. And learners are required to do lots of different writing practices. Through progymnasmata, learners use the same text, such as one of Aesop’s fables, but practice different steps which take them from the easier to the more difficult. They may change animal characters into human characters since the most common characters in the fables are animal characters. To check the language-focused learning, learners need to design their ideas to show how to change the story characters and put them in a written way in order not to go off the original text. Then, through ample writing opportunities, the learners can develop their fluency in writing by using the same fable several times but changing words or phrases or even sentences.

In this present study, the fable is used as progymnasmata activity to be a writing lesson activity. The first step is doing imitation in writing. Imitating a text that a learner is already familiar with will encourage learning growth. The learners begin to change an easier text by making easy changes such as the main characters or genders to practice how to use appropriate pronouns. They then move on to the phrases and sentences but learners need to keep in mind the message of the fable and follow it. It is imitating the original text such as The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse. The next step is to paraphrase the original text. It is more advanced writing practice. However, after practicing imitation, learners most likely understand the meaning of the
fable and through changing small parts, such as pronouns, they become familiar with paraphrasing. Doing progymnasmata requires the teacher to guide clearly and show models of each of its steps. For fables particularly, learners need to be provided with more familiar ones.

Pedagogically, progymnasmata can be a useful tool to develop writing skills for EFL learners with carefully, well-designed guides. It was used for a long time to train effective and good writers and speakers by rhetoric teachers of the past so it can be a good resource to adapt into writing classes today. However, progymnasmata has twelve commonly used categories. In another words, it takes times and research to design writing lessons especially focusing on EFL writers. This is why this study’s limitation had only one category that was adapted and made as a suggested lesson idea. Also this study does not attempt to prove the effectiveness of imitation and paraphrasing as a writing activity but it tries to hypothesize the writing activity model. It requires further empirical and theoretical studies to show its greater possible benefits and challenges.

REFERENCES


Examples in: English
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