

Improving Students' Writing Skills by Using Fables

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ABSTRACT

To many teachers, poor writing skill is a worrying problem among the students and many also view writing as the most difficult language skill to acquire. Currently, many children are fortunate to be taught using methods that embrace their right-brain creativity and some educators have discovered greater potentials for better writing by learning what they can from every situation using fables. The aim of this research was to investigate the level of effectiveness of using fables as a tool to enhance students' performance in writing. The findings reveal that the students are interested in using fables to learn writing, thus they participated well in all the activities using the fables. The increase in performance when comparing the pre-test scores with the post-test scores also proved that the activities carried out using the fable had helped the respondents to write more creatively.

Keywords: *writing, fables, creativity*

Introduction

English language is not only the language of international communication but also the lingua franca among business and commercial communities. This global language transcends the barriers of distance, race and is used daily in international gatherings and conventions. However, many have overlooked the importance of the writing component as one of the communication tools that are closely associated with learning of a language. Writing is intimately connected with thinking. Consequently, competent writing is not only a tool for expressing thought but also putting it effectively in words. Competency in writing is an essential skill in virtually all aspects of modern life and a prerequisite for many professions.

Recent developments in education have drawn national attention to the importance of writing. New electronic media like e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, personal web pages and 'blogging' have created multiple opportunities for students to write in different styles for varying purposes and audiences. Students can be taught to improve their writing through effective writing instruction strategies which are known to boost students' achievement.

The most important factor in choosing writing exercises is that students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience more effective. Encouraging students' participation in the exercises, while at the same time refining and expanding writing skills, requires a certain pragmatic approach. Therefore, due to their simplicity and structure, some teachers view fables as a good source of writing approach that would attract the interest of the students to learn writing.

Fable, according to Longman dictionary of contemporary English (2005,) is "a traditional short story that teaches a moral lesson, especially a story about animal" (p.558). Fables can be considered as an interesting teaching tool as old tradition, beliefs and moral values are embedded in each story. Readers, mostly children, get easily attracted to read fables since "the characters were "thinking" and "speaking" animals (cats, mouse, sheep, etc.) who had the task of "educating" to behave according to the rules accepted by most people" ("The fable", n.d.). Fables are much more than just stories, or fairy tales, since embedded in them are valuable moral values that are passed from one generation to the other (Bruti, 1999).

According to Raimes, (1983), writing is generally regarded as one of the productive skills which are difficult to acquire in language learning. Teachers of English are often faced with the challenge of teaching their students to read and write in English when the students have a native language that is not English and they are not yet proficient in English. These teachers are often confronted with the dilemma of choosing suitable teaching techniques to teach writing to these groups of students. In the ESL context where learners have limited exposure to the English language, this problem is compounded. Often, such learners are reluctant writers as they regard writing as an academic exercise which is not personally meaningful. Therefore, this research is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of using fables in teaching writing, where the aim is to determine whether fables can be a tool in the teaching of writing narrative essays in a Year Five classroom.

Literature Review

As writing is often considered as the most difficult language skill to master (Raimes, 1983), most people, including professional writers would agree that composing a text is neither an easy nor spontaneous activity (Byrne (1991) as cited in Grabe, 2001). A similar view is shared by Applebee (1978) when he states that, learning to write is a complex and ongoing process; although it begins early and continues throughout life. For most people, writing remains a difficult process (Applebee, 1978). In addition, writing has little or no value for them as a form of social interaction, even though the ability to write carries prestige in most cultures. Hence, it is no wonder that many children do not enjoy writing. Very few in fact succeed in becoming really proficient at writing and many cease to use this skill once they leave school or use it only occasionally for specialized purpose, for example, filling in forms.

Since writing involves making meaning, the students can only write about things that they have knowledge about or have experience in. Conversely, they cannot be expected to write well about things that are not meaningful to them. Hence, topics for writing in the classroom setting must be as relevant to the students' life as possible. When the topic involves something foreign to the writer, they will have to engage in critical reading for content in order to be able to write a reasonable piece of text (Berthoff (1992) cited in Carson & Leki, 1993). In effect, they have to interact with and make meaning out of the reading of related materials before embarking on writing. In the process of writing, students would have to be taught how to make clear the context in their writing so that the intended message gets across to the reader.

Stories as the Tool for Writing

This study explored a genre-based teaching-learning approach where students were taught writing through the use of a genre and the process approaches. There are several reasons that encourage language teachers to use genre-based approach in the classroom and one of them is cultural enrichment (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Hişmanoğlu also mentions that although fables portray imaginary story, "it presents a full and colourful setting in which characters from many social and regional backgrounds can be described (2005, p.54).

The use of the story is a methodology to bridge different aspects of language education, which are otherwise taught in isolation (Garvie, 1990). The story offers a 'thematic approach to education' (Garvie, 1990, p.20) where it is the project or centre of interest. Using stories in the classroom not only allows the teacher to train the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the learners but also to develop the cognitive and affective aspects of the learner. The use of the story has long been a technique in English language teaching (Garvie, 1990). One obvious advantage of using it is that stories are enjoyable and interesting. Most people like stories, whether to hear them or to tell them (Raimes, 1983). When we hear or read a good story, we cannot wait to find out what happens next. Hence, it is no wonder that the child is "encouraged to want the key to wonders untold" (Garvie, 1990, p.20), that is, to learn to read for pleasure. In other words, there is extrinsic motivation to learn with the story as a tool.

An important role stories play in our lives, especially in the lives of children is evident. Moffet quotes, "they (children) utter themselves almost entirely through stories- real or invented-and they apprehend what others say through story" (as cited in Gravie, 1990, p.21). The story, thus, is a means of communication built through sharing of stories via listening and reading, responding to them and this helps to build awareness of other listeners and readers (Wright, 1995). Hence, the use of stories is not as foreign or childish with older learners as would have been generally regarded.

The Reading-Writing Connection

Reading and writing are important components of literacy (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). Although they have been taught as separate respondents in the past, there has been a shift of pedagogy over the past two decades in teaching them together as skills. In particular, this trend was "facilitated by the progressivism movement (where projects require the combined application of various language skills rather than in isolation) and social constructivist movements in education" (Nelson & Calfee, 1998, p.142). This trend has occurred not out of chance but as a result of perceived benefits and also research findings. Grabe notes that "reading and writing should be taught together and the combination of both literacy skills enhances learning in all areas" (200, p.87).

In order for a learner to write, the learner must have prior experience with the subject matter to be put in the text. Carson and Leki state that reading can be the basis of writing (1993). This act of literacy actually includes both reading and writing happening together because writing occurs during reading in the form of summarization or re-presentation of other writers' texts or note-taking (Nelson & Calfee, 1998). Hence, reading well is important for a writer to write well, as noted by Stotsky (1995), "reading experience seems to be a consistent correlate of, or influence on, writing ability" (as cited in Garbe, 2000, p.67).



The Study

Some teachers view fables as an interesting and creative language tool to motivate students towards learning, as the fables are rich with schemata which are parallel to the students' background knowledge. The simplicity of the fables, as well as the happy ending ensures that it is the right choice to be focused for the task administered. Moreover, there is still a lack of numbers of researches done on this topic, especially in Malaysian context. Therefore, this motivates the researchers to determine the effectiveness of using fables in teaching writing narrative essays to improve students' writing skills. The findings can provide a significant input and relevant information to teachers and practitioners on the alternative methods to improve students' writing skill. Hence, the research questions are as follows:

- i. What is the students' perception towards the use of fables in learning writing?
- ii. To what extent does the use of fables help to improve students' writing of narrative essays?

Methodology

In this experiment research, the researcher first gave a questionnaire to all the 30 respondents in Year 5 Ibnu Sina class of SK Jengka 21, Maran, Pahang, to obtain the demographic information. The class comprised of both high and average achievers in the English language, which were determined through their final examination scores when they were in Year 4. Next, a 40-minute pre-test was administered to all the respondents of this research. In this pre-test, these respondents were asked to write a narrative essay based on a topic given by the teacher. This was important to determine the level of the respondents' competency in writing before teaching was carried out. The scores obtained during the pre-test were later compared with the post-test scores to measure the effectiveness of using fables in teaching narrative essay writing.

The respondents were then divided into two groups; 15 students in the Experimental Group and the other 15 in the Control Group. For three weeks (one session per week), both groups underwent different treatment; the Experimental Group did different learning activities in each session, such as rearranging sentence strips in the correct order to form a complete story, semantic or mind-mapping of words, phrases, ideas and values in the story and role-playing. All these activities were based on the fable 'What A Night!'. Meanwhile, the respondents in the Control Group were taught the conventional way. On the 4th week, the post-test was administered on both groups where the respondents were required to write a narrative essay on the same topic as in the pre-test. Finally, another set of questionnaire was distributed to the Experimental Group to obtain information on the respondents' perceptions towards the activities carried out and if they had helped them in improving their writing skills.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaires and the scores of both pre-test and post-test were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16.0. In analyzing the pre-test and post-test marks, the scores were calculated and means and standard deviation were measured. Meanwhile, the responses to the feedback questions from the Experimental Group were calculated in percentages.

Findings and Discussion

RQ1: What is the students' perception towards the use of fables in learning writing?

The students' responses were averaged to find their perception on the use of fables done by their instructor in the classroom. The findings showed that the respondents prefer to learn to write narrative essays using the fables. The respondents found using fables in the teaching of writing narrative essays interesting and enjoyable. The researchers also observed that the respondents enjoyed participating in all the activities using the fables. The respondents, too, agreed that the teaching of writing using fables is more interesting than the traditional chalk-and-talk method of learning. This was a positive sign that the respondents had enjoyed and favoured the teaching of writing using fables. When respondents enjoy and appreciate new inputs in one way or another, it contributes to the quality of the teaching and learning process.

Table 1: Students' Perception towards the Use of Fables in Classroom

Items	Responses (%)	
	Yes	No
Do you like using fables in learning to write narrative essays?	86.67	13.33
Did you find the activities useful in helping you to write the narrative essay?	73.33	26.67
Did the activities motivate you to write a narrative essay creatively?	80	20
Do you think learning writing using fables is more interesting?	86.67	13.33

RQ2: To what extent does the use of fables help to improve students' writing of narrative essays?

The second question is aimed at finding out to what extent the use of fables has helped to improve students' ability to write narrative essays in the English Language. It was found out that the students in the experimental group had improved their scores in the posttest compared to the pretest scores. It can be seen that the mean score of the posttest for the experimental group (16.60) was higher than their pretest score, which was 9.93. This could mean that the teaching activities that were carried out helped the respondents to understand the fable better. The pair and group activities that were carried out during the teaching sessions were well-participated by the respondents. The increase in marks when comparing the pre-test with the post-test proves that the activities carried out using the fable had helped the respondents to write more creatively.

Table 2: Comparison of Means and SD of Students' Scores of Pre-test and Post-test.

Samples/items	Subject (n)	Mean	SD
Pre-test Control	15	11.80	4.14
Pre-test Experimental	15	9.93	3.59
Post-test Control	15	12.33	3.87
Post-test Experimental	15	16.60	4.44

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of students' scores of both pre-test and post-test. The mean score for the control group for pre-test was 11.80 as compared to the experimental group which had a score of 9.93. The mean score for the control group for post-test was 12.33 as compared to the experimental group which scored 16.60. In order to determine whether there were significant differences between both groups' scores, paired t-test was applied.

Table 3: Scores of students' Performance of Pre-test – Post-test

Pair	N	df	t-value	p-value (<0.05)	Sig.
Pair 1 Control group pretest ~ posttest	15	14	-1.835	0.088	No
Pair 2 Experimental group pretest ~ posttest	15	14	-8.996	0.000	Yes

Table 3 shows the differences between the control and experimental groups for both pre-test and post-test. The p-value for the first pair was 0.088; therefore, it could be said that there was no significant difference between pre-test experimental group and pre-test control group since the p-value was greater than 0.05. However, the p-value for the second pair was 0.000 and it could mean that there was a significant difference between post-test experiment group and post-test control group. The t-value (4.160) shows that experimental group performed better in the post-test compared to the control group. This implies that the treatment given – teaching using fables – was effective.

Conclusion

As teachers do make a difference in affecting students' learning, there has been a continual interest to describe and explain effective teaching techniques and strategies. The analysis of the data in this research proves that the fable can be an essential element in the teaching of writing as it can help to motivate learners to write in an ESL classroom. Using fables to teach writing in the classroom can enhance and improve students' performance in writing. This is revealed in this research where the learners in the experimental group had shown better performance in the writing task. These students were found to be more creative in expressing ideas. In addition, the lessons using the fable had successfully helped the students to write better by giving them more interesting and cohesive ideas. Consequently, it can be said that this research has proven that the use of fables in the teaching of narrative essays in the English language classroom has helped the learners by enhancing their interest and motivating them towards improving the writing skill.

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