



## Review Article

# Folktales as a Valuable Rich Cultural and Linguistic Resource to Teach a Foreign Language to Young Learners

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**Abstract:** Quite a few language teachers and educators have supported the literature-based approach in teaching both a second and foreign language. In many cases the use of stories including folktales has been observed to be most common of all types of literature in language classrooms. This article highlights the multifaceted rationale for using folktales to teach foreign languages, especially to young learners. It presents features of folktales which have the potentials to facilitate child foreign language acquisition. The article also provides implications for how folktales can be used effectively in language classrooms for young learners.

**Keywords:** Folktale, Children, Teaching, Foreign Language, Stories

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## 1. Folktales and Children

### 1.1. Folktales

*Folktales* (also written as *folk tales*) are among the most common types of folklore narrative. A folktale is a story, myth or legend forming part of an oral tradition, does not have a single, identifiable author or writer and is or was passed down from one generation to the next. A folktale can change over time, be reshaped by modifications and was often changed with each retelling. As a result, there can be various versions of the same folktale. This will be demonstrated through this book when some folktales are provided with different versions across a number of chapters.

As a form of common folklore, folktales sugarcoat the hard lessons of life so as to give listeners or readers guidance about how they should behave. In this way, folktales help pass values and beliefs, traditions and culture across the generations. Popular examples of folktales are fairy tales (or fairytales), myths, legends, trickster tales, and tall tales.

### 1.2. Source of Folktales

There are different places we can go to in the search for stories to use to teach English to young learners. Most common sources are the Internet, series of graded readers,

picture books and magazines or periodicals for children.

#### *The Internet*

Nowadays many people would choose to go first to the Internet and this can lead them to popular websites where they can find folktales in English of different cultures. At these addresses we can find a number of stories, most often folktales already edited and offered for use with lesson plans and teaching activities. From some online sources teachers can download pages of text or drawings and photocopy them (called photocopiables) for classroom use. Unfortunately, these lesson plans are limited and not aligned with any specific curriculum. It is often costly to download them. And sometimes the English used is not of a suitably high standard.

#### *Series of graded readers*

Graded readers are a series of books that keep increasing the difficulty levels by increasing the vocabulary and including more complex language structures. Series of graded readers are often used to develop young learners' reading fluency rather than being used to develop listening skills. When the child can read books coded as a specific level easily, s/he moves to the next level and reads through all of those books before moving to books of a more difficult level. They are more popular in classrooms where English is being taught as a first or second language than in contexts where it is a foreign language. In developing countries, series of graded readers are

rarely found in EFL classes due to the limited availability of funding. Series of graded readers tend to provide simplified versions of classic literary works rather than folktales.

#### *Periodicals for children*

Teachers can also go to periodical publications for children where they can find fairy tales or short stories provided with some illustrations. These stories are usually modified and long ones can be broken down into several episodes published through a number of continuous volumes. Periodicals for children may be published weekly or monthly. If the gap is any longer the young language learners may forget the last episode of a story

#### *Picture books*

Picture books published by international and national publishers are now found more frequently in the bookshops of developing countries. They vary from fairy tales, to fables, to folk ballads with a plot. They are also written in simple language suited to the levels of young readers. However, picture books, especially those published internationally and in color, are still unaffordable in poor countries for many families with young children.

Teachers can consider many different sources and, over time, accumulate a collection of folktales and stories that can be used in their classrooms. It is recommended that teachers share their collections of stories so that each can increase the number of available resources.

### **1.3. Folktales and Children**

From a very young age children, in every country and of different races and ages, are told folktales from their home country by their parents, grandparents and even siblings. Many children hear these stories when very young and spend their childhood knowing these stories, folk songs and ballads.

Psychologists and educators have emphasized the vital role stories play in child development [16]. Stories, especially folktales, provoke their imaginations and provide them with material from which children create their understanding of origins and purposes of the world and form abstract concepts and values which may guide them. These stories stimulate their imagination about the world, allow them to visualize the world outside their homes, help them understand rights and wrongs, what behaviour is expected and accepted, what is disapproved of and what consequences may follow. Through folk stories, children learn about the values of family, friendship, hard work, honesty, faith, love, respect, safety and the cost of (often young children's) disobeying parents, betrayal, laziness, and so on. Through folktales, which often have happy endings as the good, the honest, the hard-working and brave win respect and love while the bad, lazy, and dishonest are punished, children develop their own understanding and appreciation for good, positive values and characteristics. Children can enjoy great works of folklore and discover their own role, identity and responsibility through folktales [1].

As a result of their exposure to folktales many children grow up with exciting dreams about becoming a hero or princess or fairy or magician as they hear the stories they are

told. Stories, legends and fairy tales have become an important part of children's intellectual life and for many provide an indispensable part in the process of growing up.

## **2. Folktales as a Holistic Approach to Teach Language**

Literature-based language teaching has been considered a common approach to promote both oral (listening and speaking) and literacy (reading and writing) skills. It involves the use of literary works of different types and scopes, ranging from prose and poems to folk chants and folktales to engage learners with meaningful, authentic input.

Stories, in general, and folktales, in particular, bring a holistic approach to foreign language teaching and learning. Through stories, learners acquire more than just language knowledge and usage and have opportunities to hear and use language in meaningful, engaging ways. Story-based teaching helps children develop an appreciation as well as an enjoyment of literature and supports the development of all of literacy, oral and social skills at the same time [5]. Children learning through folktales can also develop their imagination and to make use of their creativity. They learn about negotiations and life values through the interactions and behaviour of characters.

Stories from the oral traditions of many countries throughout the world provide learners with knowledge about social contexts which are familiar and also exciting. These stories portray contexts through which new language can be introduced and offer insights into different cultures, situations and scenarios in which people from their homeland or from a different country live and behave towards one another, settle conflicts and solve problems. The social contexts described in folktales also present learners with knowledge about how people from many countries thought and believed in earlier times, describing local social settings and the social expectations, thinking and reasoning which may be unique to a specific historical time. Such contexts add to the sense of expectation created by the events in stories and not found in other types of texts.

## **3. Reasons for Integrating Folktales into Language Curriculum for Young Learners**

### **3.1. Folktales Make Learning Fun, Enjoyable and Engaging to Young Language Learners**

Unlike adult language learners who often learn a foreign language with a motivation, most children do not learn a foreign language for any inherent reason. Therefore, making the learning of a foreign language fun creates motivation for young learners to learn the language. Stories and folktales can make teaching more enjoyable and learning more effective for pupils and students [8] because they bring a world of wonder and magic. By this means they can make learning fun and

enjoyable.

Folktales provide an opportunity for teachers to design activities which engage learners and create a stress-free, non-threatening environment for learning to occur. As young learners children can immerse themselves in stories, find the stories interesting to read or to listen to and be excited by being involved in related activities or tasks provided by the teacher. A story such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* can engage young learners. Their interest can be roused from the moment Goldilocks enters the house and every time she does something while she is in the house.

### **3.2. Folktales Provide Meaningful, Authentic Comprehensible Input**

Research has shown that children are oriented towards meaning in language use rather than to forms. This explains why metacognitive analysis or instruction (e.g. “*House* is a noun and *beautiful* is an adjective. Adjectives go before nouns so we say *a beautiful house*) in language teaching for learners is not recommended. Neither should there be direct corrective feedback on young language learner’s language misuse (e.g. “It’s wrong. You should say *I went home at 6 pm yesterday*, not *I go home at 6 pm yesterday* because yesterday is in the past”). Various cognitive development theories suggest that children are active sense makers. During the different stages of their cognitive development children are actively engaged in the process of making sense in order to understand. Examples, below, are not uncommon in the foreign or second language classroom:

Student (7-year-old boy): Can I go to the toilet?

Teacher (focusing on form, on contrasting “can” and “may”): May I go to the toilet?

Student: But I said it first (*crying, thinking the teacher wanted to go before him.*)

These instances highlight young learners’ orientation towards meaning. Folktales provide meaningful, authentic, comprehensible input, with the language use in context driven by meaning rather than form. Every folktale has characters who interact with one another, communicate with one another as they would in real life. Young language learners as readers or listeners are provided with a meaningful context to enable them to make sense of what happens in the story.

Folktales may also have a common motif that leads to a moral or life lesson. By being exposed to folktales children may comprehend these lessons and values presented in vivid, lively settings. Typical features of folk tales found in most versions are:

*An opening:* This part often may begin with a formulaic expression such as “*Once upon a time*”, often found in fairy tales.

*Introduction of characters:* The characters involved in the story are introduced by name very early. Common characters include humans and animals but sometimes there are mythical creatures.

*Descriptions of the setting:* This describes the location or place (e.g. in a house, in the forest, beside a river, on a mountain) where the story occurs and may present some

background information about the event.

*Introduction of a problem:* This describes what the problem, conflict or issue is and sometimes says why it is so.

*A series of events:* Different connected happenings or events are described, which leads to a final result.

*The resolution:* This is when the problem, conflict or issue is resolved. Often the intelligent, hard-working will win over the lazy and arrogant, and the kind and courageous will find a happy ending. In contrast, the unkind and cruel will pay a high price and/or learn a lesson.

*A closing.* This is when a moral is explicitly stated or implied. For fairy tales, this part is sometimes formulaic, e.g. “*They all lived happily ever after.*”

Story telling is an oral activity, and stories have the shape they do because they are intended to be heard and remembered, and, sometimes, participated in. The key structural feature of stories is that events happen in a time sequence. Stories may also have a thematic structure, i.e. there is some central interest factor or a theme that changes during the story. These can be difficulties or evils which are later overcome, or a major event which is then survived. Cameron (2001) illustrates this theme in the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* [7]. In this story the main characters are a little girl always wearing a red coat with a hood, which provides her name, living with her parents near a forest, her grandmother who lives in a different part of the forest and a big bad wolf who wants to eat people. The wolf provides the problem.

The story covers the events of one day, when Little Red Riding Hood goes to visit her grandmother and on the way, in spite of her mother’s warnings, she leaves the path to pick flowers, and meets the wolf. She tells the wolf where she is going. The wolf rushes ahead, eats the grandmother, dresses in her clothes, and waits for the girl to arrive. In many versions he does not eat the grandmother – he ties her up and puts her under the bed or in a wardrobe. At first Little Red Riding Hood does not notice that it is the wolf in her grandmother’s bed. Then she notices that her grandmother has big eyes and ears (and sometimes a deep voice) and big teeth. The wolf is about to eat Little Red Riding Hood but she screams and, just in time, her father arrives and kills the wolf. The grandmother jumps out of the wardrobe or from under the bed and all ends happily. The story has two morals: that wickedness will be overcome and that children should do what their parents tell them.

### **3.3. Folktales Provide Opportunities for Engaging Young Learners in Natural Repetitions of New Language**

Second language acquisition theories maintain that it is important for language learners to hear the main content (e.g. the new structure or vocabulary) again and again. This assists in creating a connection between what learners hear and its meaning and to make sense first of the oral forms of language. Teachers can repeat the new structure or vocabulary and then ask learners to repeat it. However it should be noted that repetition of the instruction content can become less engaging and meaningful if it becomes a drill that makes repetition become boring.

Although not all folktales repeat structures or vocabulary it is not uncommon to find those that do not repeat words or sentences can be modified to include repetitions in a meaningful, natural manner. This is often referred as *parallelism* [7]. Pham et al. (2015) illustrate this this parallelism in the Russian folktale “*The little red hen*” [15]. There are quite many structures and words repeated in the story. Expressions such as “*Who will help me*” “*Not I*”, “*I will*” are hear again and again when the story is told or read.

The development of the story from the little red hen having an idea, the hen asking her friends to help, her friends’ refusal, the hen doing all the work herself to plant the seeds, cut the wheat, grid the wheat into flour and bake the bread, the hen’s friends wanting to eat the bread, the hen deciding to eat the bread herself gives the teacher a reason to repeat the language naturally and meaningfully. This gives learners the chance to hear the language again within context. Thus the connection between the target structure and vocabulary and their meanings has more chance of being reinforced. However, it is important to remember that not all folktales with repeated structures are suitable for teaching young language learners. The structures need to be simple enough and the context should be comprehensible to young learners.

#### **3.4. Folktales Provide Rich, Authentic Vocabulary**

Through folktales, young language learners are exposed to a wide range of authentic vocabulary. This vocabulary can be nouns of concrete objects such as *house, horse, mouse, rose, table, chair, red, dwarf*, and so, or verbs: *say, swim, jump, eat, sleep, run, shout, complain, lose, threaten, kill, like* and adverbs: *slowly, sadly, luckily*. Young learners also have the chance to listen to meaningful input in chunks, rather than just single words. This gives them more chances to learn vocabulary incidentally. When teachers read stories aloud, children are exposed to patterns of language that are not found in everyday communication. They can use language of more complexity [14] and gradually expand and strengthen formal language knowledge. As children listen to stories being read aloud they build up a relationship between the printed word and its meaning [6].

#### **3.5. Folktales Allow Young Learners to Be Exposed to Various Forms of Discourse**

Stories bring into the classroom texts that originate in the world outside school [7]. In the discourse of folktales, two main uses of language in stories can be identified: narrative and dialogue.

Narrative text concerns the series of events - the order in which events were told or reported.

Dialogue is use of language as spoken by the characters in the story when they communicate with one another.

Cameron (2001) notes publishers of simplified versions of stories in English often choose the simple present tense for narrative because, in young learner EFL curriculum, the present tense is seen as being simpler and is taught first [7]. If a story is told through pictures, the present continuous

tense is often used.

Teachers using folktales expose young learners to both types of narrative and dialogue discourse and to the use of both indirect and direct speech. In particular, with natural dialogue, young learners have the chance to acquire various genres and hear natural speech. Depending on the instruction content (i.e. the language focus) teachers can also modify the original story by turning some narrative part into dialogue.

#### **3.6. Folktales Provide a Good Source of Cultural Information**

Teaching language involves teaching culture, as culture includes both the knowledge and skills needed to survive within mainstream culture and the same knowledge and skills needed to negotiate subcultures existing within the nation or country [13]. Folk tales with lively and interesting content provide a source of cultural information. As an intrinsic part of everyday life, folk stories can be used to facilitate cross-cultural understandings (because teachers will need to address the culture of those (i.e characters) who speak the language I do not understand the meaning of these last 14 words – maybe leave them out because the first part of the sentence makes good sense?). Quite a number of stories have many differing versions and the changes or differences between versions carry cultural information about the country in which each is told. Worthy & Bloodgood (1992) point out that *Cinderella* is the best-known fairytale with as many as 700 variants or versions across cultures as almost every culture has its own version of the Cinderella story [10].

Stories become even more helpful as a medium for cultural knowledge in situations where the foreign language teacher is not a member of the culture whose language s/he is teaching [9]. In common teaching practice, where there is too much focus on language, vocabulary, structures and preparation for assessment, very often culture is marginalized. Stories can be tools to put culture back into the heart of the language curriculum where it should be [8]. Since one way to learn about and appreciate a culture is to be familiar with its literature [3], multicultural folktales are an excellent source for illustrating both the uniqueness and the commonalities between cultures [12].

#### **3.7. Folktales Accommodate a Variety of Engaging Language Activities and Learning Styles**

Folktales, like other types of folklore, typically carry two levels of meaning (see section below for more discussion on the use of metaphor in folktales). At the first or surface level, it is often a literal story about people or a person. Hidden in the literal story is often a moral or a second metaphorical story that provides a window into the cultural origins of the literal story. These two levels provide allow the teacher to utilize the story and lead students into a deeper understanding of how to read for meaning, to scaffold an appreciation for figurative thought, and to acknowledge the nature of a different cultures [3].

The following steps suggested by Palmer, Shackelford,

Miller and Leclere (2006) can be used to help young learners understand the literal story better:

Stage 1: Teachers identify the figurative language that they want learners to understand.

Stage 2: Teachers elicit or explain the literal meaning of expressions or words that the teachers think may be a bit difficult for children to understand.

Stage 3: Teachers check to see if the literal meaning makes sense for learners.

Stage 4: Teachers use activities which help children relate the significance of the phrase to their lives; then they can provide examples of the expression or word in oral, informal language where the intended meaning is clear. Students can also be asked to formulate more examples, identify the correct pictures, to illustrate the expression, discuss and make predictions [4].

Once learners clearly understand the literal meaning of the story, folktales allow teachers to create a great deal many activities related to the input and context that has been provided through the story.

### **3.8. Folktales Encourage Young Learners' Imagination and Creativity**

Folktales encourage imagination and creative thinking by asking young readers to find new solutions to problem (s) presented in the story or to make predictions about what will happen next. Stories offer a whole imaginary world with miracles, mythical and magical animals and many different surprises. From these children can both enjoy that magical, amazing world while learning language at the same time. Themes start from a broad, general topic or an idea that can spread in many different directions, allowing young learners to pursue personal interests through the foreign target language [7].

In listening to or reading folktales, it is not just the literal story (the main basic content) that is made accessible to young learners. Understanding of the literal story also allows children to develop imagination and creative thinking about a world that is both familiar to them (conflicts, concerns and problems often exist in their own world) and strange to them (animals can talk, miracles occur and spells are cast). Children will have their own hypotheses about what will happen and why it happens in the story. They will have their own explanations for the series of the events presented. They will also form their own opinions and make judgments about the characters in the story. By stopping at the right time within the story and asking questions such as "What do you think will happen next?" "Why did he say/do that?" "What you think [...] will see/do next?" the teacher can stimulate young learners' thoughts about the story. Activities which allow children to imagine and contribute to the story are also helpful.

### **3.9. Folktales Help Develop Young Learners' Perceptions of Metaphoric Language Use**

Children's early experiences with folktales map subconsciously on to their real world experiences and

become a kind of script for life [1]. Folktales provide opportunities for young learners to make sense of metaphors and metaphoric language something difficult to achieve within conventional teaching practice without input from stories. For instance, when children read or hear the story of the *Little Red Riding Hood*, the forest can be seen metaphorically as life outside the safety of the family, and the wolf as representing threats to innocence and safety [7]. Accordingly, as they develop the ability to interpret figurative language, learners not only expand their capabilities for creative thought and communication they also acquire insights into expressive forms of language, allowing them to comprehend both text and speech on a deeper and more meaningful level [2].

## **4. Conclusions and Implications**

Folktales are a valuable tool in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners. They provide authentic, rich, meaningful input and facilitate the process of acquiring the target language. Undergoing constant emotional, physical and cognitive growth and with limited living experience and little knowledge about the wider world [11], children can benefit greatly from stories which provide a context for them to construct meaning from the language used, to enjoy engaging content as well as to gain knowledge of the language. Carefully selected or modified folktales also have features such as parallelism and meaningful, natural and rhythmic repetition of language and thus enhance learners' abilities to learn the language informally. Folktales allow the creation of a wide range of engaging activities which respond to the different learning styles prevalent among the young age group. Folktales can also promote children's imagination and creative thinking in learning the language and broaden their knowledge about other people living in different countries.

Folktales are available in different lengths with different levels of language complexity but it is very rare that we can find folktales that are ready for use and do not require any modification [15]. This is because folktales were not created to be used to teach languages.

They were part of an oral tradition with the stories passed from generation to generation through speech. Language lessons have their own purpose and objectives and folktales, in their original form, often do not fit well with language teaching objectives. Therefore, folktales will often require further modification for the purposes of language teaching and so that they closely correspond with the objectives of specific lessons and suit the level of cognitive, emotional and language growth of young language learners so as to facilitate their second language acquisition process. Children love stories so using folktales in primary English classes can be an enjoyable experience for pupils and therefore worth all the preparations and modifications that teachers need to make to make.

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