Using Folktales for Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Folktales in general are part of folk literature, which is more widely referred to as folklore. Simply put, a folktale is a traditional story that has been passed on by words of mouth before writing systems were developed. Folktales typically include distinctive linguistic and structural features, such as novel words, onomatopoetic sounds and repeated or paralleled phonological or grammatical patterns that create interesting rhythms. Various studies have been conducted on folktales from cultural-historical, philological-literary, sociological and psychological aspects, reflecting the wide-ranging and multidisciplinary interest in them. However, in the field of language teaching, the richness and potential of folktales seems to have been under-utilized in today's language classes. In this paper, I will draw on a linguistic and structural analysis of folktales, and argue that there are certain major benefits in using folktales for teaching English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). In particular, I will discuss the ways in which folktales can be useful for facilitating EFL/ESL learners in their understanding of the importance of language form to achieve specific communicative purposes, and also for enhancing their cross-cultural awareness.

KEYWORDS: folktales; linguistic and structural analysis; EFL/ESL; language teaching; learners

Introduction

Folktales in general are part of folk literature, which is more widely referred to as folklore. Simply put, a folktale is a traditional story that has been passed on by words of mouth before writing systems were developed. They include fables (i.e. tales with animals as the main characters and an explicit moral lesson), fairy tales (i.e. tales with some magical elements), myths (i.e. tales which are considered sacred), among many other sub-types (Taylor, 2000). Like other forms of literature, folktales call for the audience to have a certain degree of suspension of disbelief about their fictitious characters and events. Folktales also have the characteristic of literary creativity. Defined at the level of language, literary creativity involves manipulation of sounds, words, phrases or overall linguistic form of the text (Maybin & Pearce, 2006). Folktales typically include distinctive linguistic features such as novel words, onomatopoetic sounds, and repeated or paralleled phonological or grammatical patterns that create interesting rhythms.

With the development of writing systems and other forms of technology, oral tales from various cultures have been transformed into written forms (e.g. the series in Folk Tales of the World published by Sterling Publishing). Some have become part of the canon of children's literature (e.g. Carpenter & Prichard, 1984). When folktales were written down and used as a way to introduce children to literature, words suitable for the child audience were often chosen. This may have led to a misperception that these tales are only for the child audience. Indeed, oral tales do appeal to children due to their relatively simple forms of language and a storyline with proper beginning, middle and end. However, despite the outwardly simple appearance, folktales address themes and issues that are profound for all humanity. It touches on psychologically significant themes of honesty, kindness, generosity, jealousy, arrogance, greed, and so forth. The themes and issues raised in oral tales can be significant for all ages and all humanity, making them suitable for language learners of all age groups (Talyor, 2000). Folktales in their written forms may have some elaborate language features. Nevertheless, as conceptually oral stories, they still have features of oral language which make them more suitable for a storyteller to tell them orally and face-to-face with an audience, compared with other forms of literary texts such as novels or short stories.

Various studies have been conducted on folktales from cultural-historical (e.g. see Cubitt, 2006; Dorson, 1963; Dundes, 2007; Gottschall et al, 2004), philological-literary (e.g. see Babalola & Onanuga, 2012; Grayson, 2002; Hamilton, 2012; Lwin, 2010; Zipes, 2002), sociological and psychological (e.g. see Fischer, 1963; Haase, 1993; Ragan, 2009; Westland, 1993) aspects, reflecting the wide-ranging and multidisciplinary interest in them. However, in the field of language teaching, the richness and potential of folktales seems to have been under-utilized in today's language classes (Bean, 1999; Taylor, 2000). In this paper, I will draw on a linguistic and structural analysis of folktales, and argue that there are certain major benefits in using folktales for teaching English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). In particular, I will discuss the ways in which folktales can be useful for facilitating EFL/ESL learners in their understanding of the importance of language form to achieve specific communicative purposes, and also for enhancing their cross-cultural awareness.

Using two short stories to illustrate how literary texts can be incorporated in English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classes, McKay (2001) argues that there are three major benefits in using literature as content in Second Language (L2) classrooms – (i) demonstrating for learners the importance of language form to accomplish specific communicative purposes, (ii) providing an ideal basis for integrating different language

skills, and (iii) raising students' and teachers' cross-cultural awareness. If the use of written literary texts such as short stories and novels is recommended for language teaching and their benefits for language learners attested, is there also a place in language classes for oral literary texts like folktales, which are often regarded as the "simple" form of narrative? What could be the benefits and ways in which they can be used?

Using folktales in language classes

Studies of narrative and its structures have made a distinction between the narrative content (often referred to as "what" or story elements which include a basic description of the main events making up the storyline or plot, characters, time and location), and the varying manner in which the narrative is actually told (referred to as "how" or discourse features which include the actual words and grammatical patterns used by a particular storyteller to present the story) (Chatman, 1978). The "what" or story elements are said to have the possibility of "total transfer" from one medium to another and from one language to another, whereas the "how" or discourse features used in an actual presentation of the story will vary (Toolan, 2001). Take a well-known oral-derived tale Cinderella as an example. There exist the French, European, Native American, Japanese versions of Cinderella. The story of Cinderella can also be in the form of an oral storytelling performance, a picture book or a movie. However, all these versions share more or less the same fundamental event sequence (Propp, 1968, 1975).

The reward/punishment storyline found in folktales from different cultures is another example (Lwin, 2009). In this type of tales, one of the two characters was good-natured, performed the tasks or tests on humility, honesty or other moral qualities successfully, and was rewarded. The other character was bad-tempered, failed in the similar tasks or tests, and was punished. The fundamental event sequence or the contrastive narrative structure in this type of tales can be summarized as follows:

Protagonist A: Task → Success → Reward
Protagonist B: Task → Failure → Punishment

This contrastive narrative structure is found in Myanmar folktales, e.g. *The Golden Crow* (Maung, 1948; Lwin, 2010); Korean folktales, e.g. *Hungbu and Nolbu* (Grayson, 2002); medieval Arabic folktales, e.g. *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Drory, 1977); among others. What these examples show is that different cultures may use different tasks or tests for the characters; nevertheless, the underlying message of what is morally or ethically right, what is wrong and the consequences of actions, and the use of contrastive narrative structure to render such messages prove to be the same (Lwin, 2010). Now we will consider how this and a few other characteristics of folktales make them useful for language teaching.

Understanding the importance of language form for specific communicative purposes

According to Bean (1999), the characteristic of universality or similarity of the fundamental event sequence in folktales from various cultures makes these tales "one of the most accessible vehicles for language learning" (p. 58). In English language classes, tales from any culture translated into English can be useful for beginners to learn simple grammatical features, such as simple past and present tenses, coordinating connectors like "and" and "but". Being the closest to the oral tradition, the language of folktales will be less complex than the language of academic writing. For example, folktales rarely include phrases like "notwithstanding the fact that" (Taylor, 2000, p. 13). The somewhat simple grammar in folktales makes them useful for the beginners as they will find these texts easier to process.

Familiar themes of honesty, kindness, jealousy, greed or other moral issues and familiar narrative structures (such as the reward/punishment storyline) in these tales can also motivate them to listen or read with confidence (Taylor, 2000). In other words, familiarity with the underlying narrative structure and messages in a tale allows beginning ESL/EFL learners to use more cognitive space to pay attention to the language features. This in turn could facilitate their understanding of how specific vocabulary and grammatical patterns of English can be used to realize meanings which are familiar to them. To illustrate how this might occur in an EFL/ESL classroom, let us take a look at some excerpts from a Myanmar folktale, *The Golden Crow* (Lwin, 2010; Maung, 1948), which has the reward/punishment narrative structure.

Excerpt (1):

Long ago, there lived an old widow who was very poor. She had a daughter who was kind and good-natured.

This excerpt, which appears at the beginning of the tale, can be used as the basis for a vocabulary task for beginners learning meaning relations between words, e.g. antonyms. Learners who are familiar with folktales which have a reward/punishment storyline will be able to predict that in this type of tales the introduction of a main character described as being kind and good-natured will be followed by the introduction of another main character who had the attributes which were the opposite of the first main character's. This predictability is useful in providing learners with opportunities to use antonyms in English that they have learnt and to understand how antonyms can be used to compare and contrast people, action and events. The teacher may ask learners to describe the attributes of another main character or to fill in the blanks in Excerpt (2) below, following Excerpt (1) above. Learners will have to understand and use the antonyms of "kind" and "good-natured" respectively in Excerpt (2).

Excerpt (2):

There was another old widow in the village, but she was not poor. She also had a daughter who, however, was ___*(greedy)*___ *and* ___*(bad-tempered)*___ *.*

Similarly using an excerpt in which the character was asked to make a choice among a few available options, the teacher could help learners to understand how hyponyms/ co-hyponyms can be used in the context of a sentence or utterance when the communicative purpose is to offer options or choices. For example, using Excerpt (3), the teacher could explain how the co-hyponyms "gold", "silver" and "brass" (or the three hyponyms of "metal") are used when giving the character in the tale the options to choose from.

Excerpt (3):

The crow looked out of a window of the little golden house, and said, 'Oh, there you are! Do come up. But, of course, I must drop the ladder first. Do you want the gold ladder, the silver ladder, or the brass ladder?'

Likewise, repeated or parallel sequences of events in folktales are useful for providing learners opportunities to become familiar with the syntactic structures which are used more than once to describe these repeated or parallel sequences of events in a tale. Following the event described in Excerpt (3) above, the character had to go through another test/task in this tale. In describing the second test/task, the teacher can have learners use a similar syntactic structure "Do you want _____?" and ask them to think of a relevant set of hyponyms/ co-hyponyms for offering another set of options (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt (4):
'You must have dinner with me', invited the crow. 'But let me see, do you want the _____, the _____, or the _____ to eat your food from?
(Answer: gold plate, silver plate, brass plate)

For more advanced learners the focus of the lesson can be on understanding the structure or organization of texts. For example, after listening to the tale *The Golden Crow* or another popular tale like *Little Red Riding Hood*, learners can be asked to rewrite it as a news story. Such activities are useful to draw learners' attention to the typical structural components characterizing different text types. The typical organization of an oral tale has the so-called narrative pyramid structure (see Figure 1) and follows the sequence of orientation (background about characters, time and place) > complication (problems, obstacles or main action) > resolution (how complication is resolved). On the other hand, a news story typically has the freshest/latest or most important event on the top, with specific details and less important background information about the characters arranged progressively. The organization of a news story can, therefore, be illustrated as an "inverted pyramid" structure (White & Thomson, 2008) (see Figure 2).

Little Red Riding Hood as a fairy tale typically begins with the orientation: "There was once a sweet little girl who lived with her parents in a little cottage at the edge of a wood". A rewrite of *Little Red Riding Hood* as a news story will, however, start: "Brave woodcutter honoured after saving a little girl from being mauled by the wild wolf" or "Little girl saved from being attacked by the wild wolf." Through these activities teachers can raise learners' awareness and help them understand the lexicogrammatical as well as discourse or structural patterns used in different text types to achieve specific communicative purposes. Hence, like other forms of literary texts, folktales can be useful to demonstrate for language learners the importance of language form – such as vocabulary, syntactic structure and organization of texts – to create a particular effect in meaning and achieve a specific communicative purpose.

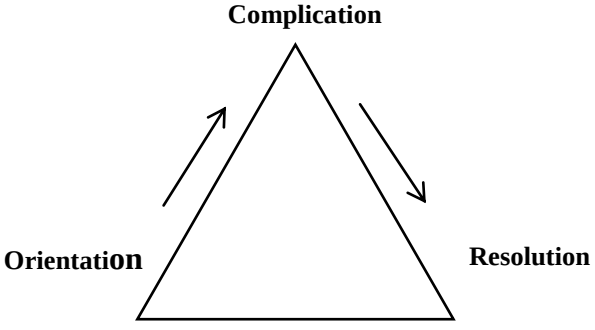

Figure 1 Narrative Pyramid

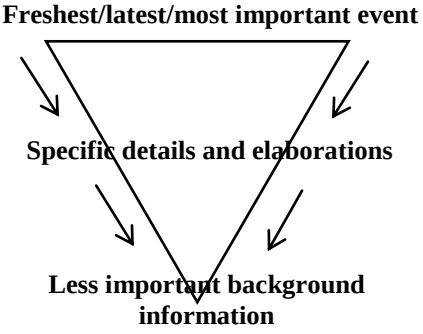

Figure 2 Inverted Pyramid

Enhancing cross-cultural awareness

Also, for more advanced learners, folktales can be used as a pedagogical springboard to help them develop skills in using the target language to make critical or imaginative responses, and to explore language and culture simultaneously (Bean, 1999; Taylor, 2000). Tales with familiar themes or similar types of characters and events from other cultures can motivate learners to make comparisons, highlight similarities and differences, provide critical responses and justify opinions. To illustrate how teachers might use folktales to enhance learners' cross-cultural awareness, let us revisit the Myanmar folktale, *The Golden Crow*. In the tale, the mother (the old widow) asked her daughter to watch a tray of paddy which was being dried in the sun. When the paddy was nearly dried, a crow with gold feathers came and

ate up every bit of the paddy, despite the girl's effort to scare it away. After having learners read the tale, the teacher might pose a series of questions as follows:

- Why do you think "a tray of paddy" was featured in the tale? Why was it not "a loaf of bread"?
- Why do you think the crow was chosen to be the bird that came and ate up the paddy? Why was it not the partridge or the pigeon or any other types of birds?
- What do you think gold and its colour (as in "gold feather" "gold ladder" and "gold plate") symbolize for the people and culture in which this tale was originated?

The aim of such questions is to help learners recognize the close relationship between language and culture. Language, as a system for organizing the experience of people, emphasizes whatever is prevalent or important to the culture of the people. For example, the paddy and the crow in a Myanmar folktale represent the staple food of the Myanmar people and a common type of birds found in that country respectively. Even though a folktale from another culture may share the same reward/punishment storyline with *The Golden Crow*, a comparison between the two tales will reveal certain culture-specific narrative contents in each. By having learners discuss and share their responses to these similarities and differences using the target language – English, teachers can use folktales to provide opportunities for learners to develop skills in using the target language to make critical responses (e.g. to questions on why a particular type of food, bird and colour was chosen to be featured in the tale) and imaginative responses (e.g. to questions on what if the other types of food, bird and colour were to replace those featured in the tale).

Trickster tales, i.e. tales in which characters try to deceive each other using trickery (often to overcome a stronger opponent), are similarly useful materials to motivate learners to provide critical responses and justify them. *The Hare and the Tortoise* from Aesop's fables, *Why the Snail's Muscles Never Ache* from Myanmar folktales (Maung, 1948; Lwin, 2010) or similar trickster tales from other cultures are good examples. To illustrate, Table 1 summarizes the sequence of events constituting the underlying structure of the Myanmar folktale *Why the Snail's Muscles Never Ache* (Lwin, 2010). The characters taking the narrative roles in the tale are the Snail (Protagonist A), the Horse (Protagonist B), and cousin snails (Helper) (Propp, 1968, 1975).

Table 1
Summary and sequence of events in Why the Snail's Muscles Never Ache

Summary of the tale	Sequence of events
The Horse made fun of the Snail for being slow, as he passed the Snail on the road. The Snail replied calmly saying that snails would run swiftly only in a race, and challenged the Horse to a race to run the next morning. The Horse accepted the challenge.	1. Lack or insufficiency in one of the Protagonists (i.e. Protagonist A)
The Snail met all his cousin snails and convinced them that horse meat was medicinal and could cure aching limbs and muscles. When all the cousin snails asked him for a little bit of horse meat, the Snail told him to cooperate with him so that they could all have the horse meat. The Snail instructed his cousin snails to line the road for many miles, each at the interval of exactly one furlong distance. The Snail went to sleep while his cousin snails walked slowly over the whole night to their respective stations along the road.	2. Protagonist A meets the Helper
The next morning the Horse and the Snail met for their race. The Snail set the conditions for the race: the runners must run on and on along the road and at every furlong the runners must call out to each other to indicate that neither had fallen behind. The Horse agreed and the race began.	3. Protagonist A attempts to harm Protagonist B with trickery
The Horse ran swiftly while the Snail walked leisurely. At the first furlong, the Horse called out the Snail to check if he was still in the race. The cousin snail stationed at the first furlong replied, "Of course, I am". The Horse looked around and was surprised to see the cousin snail, whom he thought was the Snail who was competing with him. The Horse ran faster to outdo the Snail in the next furlong. But at the next furlong, there was another cousin snail who pretended to be the Snail.	4. Protagonist B submits to Protagonist A's trickery 5. Protagonist B complies with deceitful persuasion
The Horse fell down dead at last because of too much running. The Snail and all the cousin snails ate up the horse meat. As a result, the snail's muscles never ache up to this day.	6. The victory of Protagonist A and the fall of Protagonist B.

Learners from different cultures tend to have different beliefs, attitudes and experiences about trickery, wits and wisdom, and thus are likely to respond differently to the rivalry and fairness of action taken by the characters through the sequence of events in such a trickster tale. Therefore, using a trickster tale like *Why the Snail's Muscles Never Ache*, a teacher can pose questions such as:

- Was the trick used by the snail a valid way to win the race?
- How important is honesty in winning a competition?
- How important is wit in winning a competition?
- In your opinion, were the rules of the race set by the snail fair?

Using language to analyze, evaluate, justify, etc. is a skill closely associated with academic discourse, and it is often one of the important aims of language learning. When done orally in the target language, folktales can serve as a springboard for such task-based talk among learners, which in turn can support their acquisition of the language. Learners can also be given opportunities to compare, analyze, evaluate and justify their responses in writing and bring these skills to their writing development.

Implications and conclusion

According to Taylor (2000), folktales fit well with communicative approaches that focus on teaching language for communicating meaning. When folktales of the target language are used, the cultural elements of folktales also help to bridge common ground between cultures and at the same time bring out differences between them (Taylor, 2000). That is to say, folktales are useful for language learners to develop cultural awareness and understand the people who speak the language. Referring to the three main benefits of using literary texts such as novels in ESL/EFL classrooms (McKay, 2001), it can be argued that the use of oral literary texts like folktales provides similar benefits – i.e., demonstrating for learners the importance of language form to achieve specific communicative purpose, providing a useful basis for developing the four skills, and raising learners' cross-cultural awareness. What is unique about these oral literary texts is that they are brief and their storylines straightforward enough to be told face-to-face for learners during a lesson, giving learners opportunities to appreciate the discourse or actual presentations of the story with all its verbal and non-verbal features, and even to participate in the storytelling processes.

In this paper, I have discussed how folktales can be used for helping learners develop competencies in language. I have offered some practical suggestions for how folktales as oral literary texts can be used as pedagogical resources in language classes. How they are actually used in a particular language class depends on a range of factors, for example, learners' profiles and proficiency levels, learning objectives, and teachers' knowledge as well as personal interests in folktales. Nevertheless, having a good understanding of the fundamental characteristics of folktales can be helpful for teachers to start exploring the possibilities of including them as pedagogical resources in their language classes.

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