

DIGESTING FOLKTALES FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper explores how folktales can be “digested” – systematically analyzed and adapted – to serve as effective tools in English language teaching (ELT). Drawing on narrative theory, cultural studies, and second language acquisition (SLA) research, it argues that folktales provide rich linguistic input, cultural knowledge, and motivational value. The paper proposes practical strategies for integrating folktales into EFL classrooms, supporting vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and intercultural competence.

Keywords: Folktales, Language Teaching, Narrative Techniques, EFL, Cultural Competence.

Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) requires more than grammar instruction; it demands engaging content that supports meaningful communication and cultural awareness. Folktales – traditional narratives passed down through generations – are powerful, authentic resources for this purpose.

“Digesting” folktales means breaking them down into pedagogically useful components: linguistic structures, narrative patterns, cultural references, and moral lessons. By systematically analyzing these elements, educators can adapt folktales to meet language learning goals. Prior studies (Taylor, 2000; Ellis & Brewster, 2014) highlight the value of storytelling for vocabulary acquisition, grammar awareness, and intercultural competence. Yet many teachers lack clear frameworks for applying folktales in class.

This paper addresses that gap by presenting methods for “digesting” folktales for language teaching. 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, onomatopoeic 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. (Lwin, S.M. 2015).

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, literature-based approach; reviewing existing research on storytelling and language teaching; analyzing narrative techniques in classic folktales; proposing a practical framework for lesson planning Key questions guiding the analysis include:

1. What narrative features make folktales pedagogically useful?
2. How can teachers adapt folktales for vocabulary, grammar, and cultural learning?
3. What classroom activities support active engagement with folktales?

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 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 Lwin, S.M. (2015). Young learners are willing to learn what is in the narratives, because folktales are narratives or stories for children (Taylor, 2000; Virtue & Vogler, 2009).



How can learners acquire a foreign language more efficiently, and what kinds of dynamic teaching materials can make lessons more engaging? Educators employ a variety of texts to develop both linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding in their students. Incorporating folktales at all levels of language study can be especially beneficial. In this paper, I argue that folktales provide rich, multilayered resources for foreign language instruction. Drawing on my own teaching experience (as detailed in Kaliambou's *Routledge Modern Greek Reader*), I offer specific pedagogical strategies for using folktales to support foreign language learning. These approaches can strengthen all four language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—while also fostering greater cultural awareness and sensitivity among students.

Results

Across different eras and regions, language textbooks have featured folktales as effective teaching resources. For instance, French elementary school textbooks from the eighteenth century included Charles Perrault's tales as reading material (Velay-Vallantin). Perrault's stories were also used for teaching French beyond France, in countries like Germany and Greece (see Ranke and Kaplanoglou). This demonstrates how folktales can cross regional boundaries to serve as universally effective language-teaching tools. Similarly, cultures outside Western Europe have adopted folktales for language instruction. Ulrich Marzolp, for example, notes that a seventeenth-century Persian grammar text incorporated oral narratives to teach reading and translation, contributing to its popularity and success. Even today, folktales appear in children's readers and spelling books, serving as an ideal introduction to both first and foreign language learning. Modern approaches to language pedagogy argue that teaching a foreign language should go beyond formal grammar and structure, emphasizing the importance of cultural context (Kramersch, *Context*). Instructors are encouraged to use authentic materials that reflect real language use, and folktales—rich in cultural meaning—are especially valuable for supporting foreign language acquisition.

Which folktales should teachers select for classroom use? The choice depends on the specific lesson goals. Different types of tales—such as magical, religious, realistic, anecdotal, and formulaic stories—can all be effective teaching tools, each offering unique pedagogical benefits. The selection should align with students' language levels and the intended learning objectives. For example, animal tales tend to be shorter with simpler vocabulary, making them ideal for beginners. In contrast, magical, religious, and novella-style tales provide longer, more complex texts suitable for advanced learners. Formulaic tales, with their repetitive structures, are excellent for reinforcing vocabulary. Shorter jocular tales and anecdotes are particularly valuable for exploring cultural themes like humor and trickery and can be connected to students' own cultural stories. Language instructors are not necessarily folklorists and consequently do not know that folktales have various sub types.

One suggestion for instructors is to consult a catalog of tale types for the target country, so that they can gather folktales from several sub types. Instructors should choose folktales from various regions where the target language is spoken and should consider using stories in dialect form for more advanced students to get them acquainted with variety in the foreign language; dialect tales should also be considered for advanced classes in dialectology. In addition to



folktales, many genres have useful material for language instruction, for example, myths, fables, legends, urban legends, and other fantasy stories. The structure and content of these genres are similar to those of folktales and thus facilitate language acquisition, foreign-language teachers can use texts in translation from other countries to provide context for the source material in the target language. For instance, teachers can present the same folktale from different countries after teaching the target-language tale. This will generate various class discussions about intercultural similarities and differences.

For beginner English learners, it's best to choose folktales that are simple, engaging, and culturally accessible. Here are some classic folktales that work well for beginners:

Folktale	Themes	Why it Works for Beginners
The Tortoise and the Hare	Perseverance, humility	Simple vocabulary, clear moral, familiar animals aid understanding.
The Little Red Hen	Hard work, cooperation	Repetitive language, straightforward structure reinforces vocabulary and sentence patterns.
The Boy Who Cried Wolf	Honesty, consequences	Short with simple sentences, clear moral lesson ensures easy comprehension.
Cinderella (Simplified versions)	Kindness, patience	Familiar story, predictable structure, repetitive phrases make it accessible. Short, easy to understand, common vocabulary supports learning.
The Fox and the Grapes	Frustration, cleverness	

Using folktales for storytelling activities in the EFL classroom Storytelling based on folktales offers unique pedagogical advantages in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. Below is an analysis of how folktales function as effective instructional material for classroom use, with a focus on practical, observed benefits and challenges. Authentic and meaningful context folktales provide learners with authentic language embedded in meaningful cultural narratives. Unlike contrived textbook dialogues, these stories reflect cultural values, social norms, and universal themes such as honesty, perseverance, and cooperation. This cultural grounding enriches learners' intercultural competence—a key goal in modern language education (Kramsch, 1993). Example: Telling “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” lets students explore honesty as a universal moral value while learning simple past forms in context. Support for all four language skills: Folktale storytelling naturally integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing: Listening: Students actively listen to the teacher’s storytelling or peer retellings, improving comprehension. Speaking: Retelling, role-play, and discussion provide structured speaking practice. Reading: Short, engaging texts are suitable for guided or independent reading. Writing: Activities such as rewriting endings or summarizing stories encourage creative and analytical writing. Example classroom activity: Students read “The Tortoise and



the Hare,” retell it in pairs, and write their own moral or alternative ending. Language Features and Repetition: Folktales often use repetitive structures and formulaic phrases, which support language acquisition, especially for beginners. Predictable patterns aid memory and reduce cognitive load. Repetition helps internalize grammar (e.g., past tense verbs).

Formulaic openings and closings (“Once upon a time,” “They lived happily ever after”) teach common narrative conventions. Example: “The Little Red Hen” uses repetition (“Who will help me?”) for practicing question forms. Motivation and Engagement Storytelling is inherently engaging. Learners connect emotionally to characters and plot lines, which sustains attention and motivation. Drama activities and role-play further increase participation and reduce anxiety Observed Benefit: Even shy students often enjoy performing roles of animals in familiar tales, encouraging spontaneous language use. Scaffold-ed Differentiation: Folktales vary in complexity, making them adaptable to different proficiency levels: Beginners: Simple animal tales with clear morals (e.g., “The Fox and the Grapes”). Intermediate/Advanced: Longer tales with richer vocabulary and moral nuance (e.g., “Cinderella” variations).

In practice: Teachers can simplify or expand a story depending on class level. Cultural Reflection and Comparison: Folktales allow for meaningful cross-cultural discussions. Teachers can ask:

“Do you know a similar story in your culture?” “What lesson does it teach?”

This builds intercultural awareness and empathy.

Example Activity: Compare “Cinderella” with local folktale equivalents, discussing cultural values (e.g., kindness, patience).

Challenges and Considerations; While folktales offer rich opportunities, teachers must consider:

Cultural Appropriateness: Choosing stories that are accessible and respectful of learners’ backgrounds.

Language Level: Adapting complex tales to avoid overwhelming beginners. Time Constraints: Balancing storytelling with other curriculum requirements.

Suggested Strategy: Use simplified versions, visual aids, and pre-teaching vocabulary.

Conclusion

Folktales offer unique value as teaching materials in EFL classrooms. Their narrative simplicity, cultural depth, and linguistic richness make them ideal for supporting integrated language skills and intercultural competence. “Digesting” folktales means systematically analyzing and adapting them to meet learning goals. By applying narrative analysis and targeted activities, teachers can turn traditional stories into powerful pedagogical tools that engage, motivate, and educate language learners. Educators are encouraged to explore local and global folktales, fostering both language development and cultural awareness in their students.

Taylor (2000) argues that folktales align well with communicative teaching approaches that prioritize meaningful language use. When folktales from the target language are introduced, they not only provide cultural insights that help learners find shared understanding across cultures but also highlight important cultural differences. In this way, folktales support learners in developing cultural awareness and gaining a deeper understanding of the people who speak



the language. Building on McKay's (2001) discussion of three key benefits of using literary texts like novels in ESL/EFL classrooms, we can see that oral literary forms such as folktales offer comparable advantages. They help learners grasp how language forms serve specific communicative purposes, serve as an effective foundation for building all four language skills, and foster cross-cultural understanding. What sets folktales apart is their brevity and clear, simple plots, which make them easy to share in person during lessons. This allows students to experience the language through rich, authentic storytelling—including both spoken and non-verbal elements—and even take part in the storytelling themselves.

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