

## Using Folktales in ESL Classrooms

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### **Abstract**

*Literature based language teaching which involves the use of a variety of literary works like prose, poems, folktales, legends and myths has been considered a common approach to enhance language learning process. A folktale is a traditional story that has been passed orally before the advent of the writing systems. Folktales also help pass values and beliefs, traditions and culture across generations. In general, folktales include distinguishing structural and linguistic features. This paper seeks to explore the folk narratives and argues that there are certain pedagogical benefits in using folktales to understand culture and for teaching English as a second language (ESL). It further examines how folktales can be employed in ESL classrooms to augment the learners' language skills, communicative skills, vocabulary and cultural knowledge. In the study, different folktales of Manipur and Meghalaya, two states in the north eastern part of India, are explored to enhance the learner's language learning process and cultural awareness. The paper further deliberates on the various classroom practices where folktales are used to teach language, culture and values in an appealing way.*

**Keywords:** culture, folktales, language, ESL

## Introduction

Research in the field of second language teaching and learning expresses that the use of literature as a teaching material in the classroom can extensively contribute to the acquisition and learning of the target language. It involves the use of a variety of literary works like prose, poems, folktales, legends and myths to engage learners with meaningful, authentic input. Relatedly, folk literature is the traditional literature of a group of people which is generally transmitted orally. Before the advent of writing, folk literature is the only form of literature that existed in a society. Folktales are also referred to as folklore and they are an integral part of folk literature. According to Abrams (2009), a folktale is defined as “a short narrative in prose”, anonymously written that has been “transmitted orally”. Folktales may consist of fairy tales, fables, myths, among various other sub-types (Taylor, 2000). Folktales are characterized by fictitious events and characters and a certain extent of suspension of disbelief is required by the audience to conceive it. They are also rich in various features of literary creativity. Folktales are also an important source of passing on traditions, culture and values across generations. Popular examples of folktales are fairytales, fables, myths, legends, trickster tales, and tall tales. The common sources of folktales are picture books, internet, series of graded readers, magazines of periodicals for children, from the community and also from travelling. This study seeks to explore the various features of folk narratives and contends that there are certain pedagogical aspects in using folktales in ESL classrooms.

## Literature review: Folktales in ELT

Literature based language teaching has been considered a common approach to enhance language learning process. Different forms of literature with a variety of literary creativity have been used in language teaching. As observed by Maybin & Pearce, literary creativity defined at the level of language involves manipulation and use of the various linguistic form of the text (qtd. in Lwin, 2015). This may include the use of various sounds, words or phrases. In general, folktales include distinguishing structural and linguistic features like

onomatopoeic sounds, novel words and repeated grammatical patterns with interesting rhythms. According to McKay (1982), one of the most significant contributions of using literature for the purpose of language teaching is that literature contains language manifested in discourse which describes the specific use of language forms (qtd. in Tehan, Yuksel & Inan, 2015). This will be beneficial for developing the language awareness of the students (ibid). Relatedly, McKay (1982) observes other advantages like the promotion of cultural tolerance, enhancement of reading proficiency and also improving creativity for the students in the language classroom (in Tehan, Yuksel & Inan, 2015).

The distinctive universality of the basic structure in folktales from various cultures makes these tales a very important source for language learning (Bean, 1999). The English language classes can employ tales from any culture in its English translations. This can be used for beginners to learn grammatical components like simple present and past tenses, parts of speech and vocabulary. The language used in folktales being related to the oral traditions is believed to be less complex than the language used in academic writing. The simple languages used in folktales make it easier for the learners to cognitively comprehend and relate it to their daily lives. Relatedly, the universal themes of kindness, honesty, jealousy, greed and narrative structures with the storyline of reward/ punishment in the folktales can encourage the learners to listen or read with confidence (Taylor 2000). The underlying messages in the narratives of a folktale can give the learners more cognitive space to learn a language. This enables the learner to understand the specific use of grammatical patterns and vocabulary used in the folktales and how they can relate to them. In view of the preceding observations, it can be argued that the folktales which form a vital part of folk literature can be employed in English language teaching classrooms to teach English language as well as to understand culture.

## Methodology

Having deliberated on the importance of using folktales in ELT, the objective of the study is constructed to examine how the folktales which are either verbal or written can be employed in ESL classrooms to augment the learners' language skills, communicative skills, vocabulary and cultural knowledge. To realise the objective of the study, the folk narratives of Manipur and Meghalaya, two states in the north eastern part of India, are explored to teach English language. The target level of learners is the young learners in the age group of 7 to 14 years in the primary and upper primary schools of Manipur and Meghalaya. This age group is the most crucial period in the process of language, culture and value education. This is the conceptualisation stage where the learner starts opening their creative and critical mental faculties which, if monitored and utilised properly, can highly enhance their language learning process. The paper further deliberates on the various classroom practices where folktales are used to teach language, culture and values in an appealing way. The classroom practices are elaborated in detail by dividing into the following sections:

1. Folktales make learning fun
2. Folktales provide rich vocabulary
3. Folktales are a good source of cultural information
4. Folktales provide moral or life lesson
5. Folktales to teach various forms of discourse

## Folktales in the classroom: Findings and discussions

### 1. Folktales make learning fun

Stories and folktales bring a world full of wonder and magic which can make teaching and learning more enjoyable and fun. With the help of folktales, teachers are provided an opportunity to design tasks and activities which cater to engaging the learners and create a stress-free, unperturbed environment for learning to take place. As the learners find the stories interesting, they get actively involved and motivated in the tasks and activities designed by the teacher. This

creates a learner centred learning environment which enhances language learning process.

- Using *Hijan Hirao*, a folk song of Manipur

*Hijan Hirao* is a narrative poem sung on the concluding day of the *Lai Haraoba* festival of Manipur. It narrates the touching story of the mourning of a tree parent for their treasured son. After discussing the poem in the class, various tasks can be assigned to teach communicative skills and language skills. Some examples are given as under:

#### Task I:

Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to find out one of the songs which is sung on *Lai Haraoba* festival and perform in the class. For the other group, ask them to find out one form of dance of the *Lai Haraoba* festival and the same should be asked to perform in the class. They can be further asked to comment on their performances.

This task is aimed to teach communicative skills, listening and speaking skills. Further insights can be provided into the *Lai Haraoba* song and dance being performed in the class by explaining their cultural significance in the present day society.

#### Task II:

The students are divided into groups of three. Each group is provided with objects or pictures like shawls, figurines, jewelries, handicrafts, tools, paintings, graphics, etc. pertaining to the culture and the mythologies of Manipur. Ask the students to find information about the objects or pictures provided to them by a form of research or investigation. They can be asked to discuss about their research in the class which will enhance their speaking and listening skills. Based on their listening ability, the students are asked to write a short summary on each of the objects and present it in the class.

This task is aimed to teach communicative skills, listening, speaking and writing skills. Further insights in their research can be provided by

commenting on the historical, cultural, social and linguistic factors associated with the objects or pictures.

In this way, the learners enjoy the various tasks and activities as they learn communicative skills and language skills.

## 2. Folktales provide rich vocabulary

Folktales consist of stories which have a wide variety of authentic vocabulary. The vocabulary can be nouns such as mouse, rose, sun, toad, house, rabbit, deer, etc. or verbs such as eat, jump, play, swim, fight, win, kill, etc. and adverbs like sadly, beautifully, luckily, early, later, etc. Through the narrations of the folktales, the learners have a chance to listen to meaningful insights of the stories and not just listening to single words. So, they can guess the meaning of the words from the contexts which gives them a platform to learn vocabulary incidentally. This will enhance their cognitive and creative faculties thereby enhancing their learning skills. In the process when the teachers read the stories aloud in the classroom, the learners are exposed to vocabulary and language patterns which are different from their day to day communication. The learners can use this vocabulary and the language patterns and apply in real life situations and also strengthen their formal language knowledge.

- Using *What makes the Eclipse*, a folktale of Meghalaya

This folktale describes the fight between the Sun Goddess, Ka Sngi and the Giant toad, U Hynroh and how their fight causes the eclipse.

After the folktale is read in the class, vocabularies like seclusion, terrified, distress, tribute, loathsome, enchantment, etc. can be taken up and the students are asked to guess the meaning from the context and use it in their own sentences.

- Using *U Manik Raitong*, a folktale of Meghalaya

The folktale, *U Manik Raitong*, describes the legend of U Manik Raitong, the classic lover and the dispenser of the tradition of love and music in Khasi (the Khasi people are an indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya) society.

After reading the folktale in the class, words like orphan, tradition, obscure, forsaken, oblivious, fragrant, tremendous, etc. can be taken up



from the story. These words can be written on pieces of card. Tell a student to come up and pick a card and describe what it means to the rest of the class. This exercise can be repeated. With the vocabulary they have learnt, they can be asked to use in their own sentences.

### 3. Folktales are a good source of cultural information

In Hall's (2005) observation the understanding of culture is achievable by comprehending people's interaction particularly their use of language. Learning a language takes place in a cultural environment so a learner's cultural competence is conducive for effective language learning. Therefore, the teaching of culture is crucial in a second/ English/ foreign language classroom. The lively and awe-inspiring content of the folktales is a good source of cultural knowledge.

- Using *Hijan Hirao*, a folk song of Manipur

As has been mentioned earlier, *Hijan Hirao* is a folk song which is sung on the Lai Haraoba festival of Manipur. In the folk song, the cultural traditions are reflected in its myth narrations where the boat of the king called *Hiyang Hiren* is described. The myth surrounding the *sangai* (a brow antlered deer which is found only in the Keibul Lamjao National Park, Manipur) and the human head which adorns the head and tail of the king's boat *Hiyang Hiren* is a source of the Meitei (the Meitei is an indigenous ethnic group of Manipur) history, literature and culture. Till the present day, the Meitei boat racing tradition called *hiyang tannaba* is celebrated every year.

These cultural traditions can be highlighted and discussed in the class. At the same time, language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing can be taught in the class. For this, various activities mentioned below can be assigned to the students:

- group discussion based on the topic 'Culture and *Lai Haraoba* festivals'
- write and narrate a short story based on the poem, *Hijan Hirao* to incorporate the cultural elements which can be drawn from the folk song

### 4. Folktales provide moral or life lesson

Values are an integral element which is entrenched in the behaviour and activity of one's life. Most of the folktales are rich in

values which teach us moral or life lesson. By using folktales, young learners may understand these pertinent values and lessons of life in a fun and lively way.

- Using *Chainarol*, a folktale of Manipur

*Chainarol* is a folktale of Manipur, rich in values reminiscent throughout its narrations. In the folktale, a combat takes place to settle a conflict. The real winner of the combat is Moiremba but Athouba (Moiremba and Athouba are two characters in the folktale) cheated and won the combat. As Athouba had won the combat by dishonest means, his inner mental conflict consumed him to death.

The narrative brings out the trails of the victory of the righteousness and the downfall of the evil. This universal moral theory can be used to teach moral or life lessons. Using this folk narrative, language skills can also be taught. Given below are some activities to teach language skills:

- write and enact a one-act play based on the story incorporating values drawn from the extract
- group activity: to find out and write on the various forms of *Thang-Ta*, a form of martial art of Manipur which has its origin in *Chainarol*

## 5. Folktales to teach various forms of discourse

Stories are born outside school and they are brought as text inside the classroom (Cameron, 2001). The discourse of the folktales can be identified into narrative and dialogue. Narrative text describes the course of events in succession. Dialogue is a conversation between two or more characters in the story. The use of folktales can bring forth both types of narrative and dialogue discourse and also the use of direct and indirect speech. The teacher, with a slight touch of creativity can also modify the original story by turning some parts of the dialogue into narrative and vice versa.

- Teaching dialogue discourse using *U Manik Raitong*, a folktale of Meghalaya



From the folktale, the following is a conversation between the lovers, U Manik Raitong and Ka Lieng Makaw when they first met and fell in love:

Manik shouted after her, “Will I see you again?”

“If you want to see me come to my house tomorrow,” the girl shouted back. “Ask for the house of the Lyngskor.”

(Nongkynrih, 2014-2015)

From the above dialogue, direct and indirect speech can be taught in the class. The students can be further asked to write their own dialogues on any topic of their choice and present in the class.

- Teaching narrative discourse using *Hijan Hirao*, a folk song of Manipur

As *Hijan Hirao* is a narrative poem, the following extract from the folksong can be used to teach narrative discourse:

“O my son, my precious,  
They have recompensed with gold and silver for your life  
They have made axe marks on your body.”

(Trans. Singh, 2015, pp. 38-39)

After the narrative techniques have been discussed in the class, the students can be asked to convert the above extract into the dialogue discourse and discuss in the class.

In this way, the students will learn the various forms of discourse as well as enhance their communicative and language skills.

### **Conclusion and implications**

Folktales are thus a valuable source of teaching ESL. They provide authentic, meaningful and rich content which assists in enhancing language learning as well as to understand culture, values and the ways of life. In the above classroom practices, it can be said that the folktales of Manipur and Meghalaya used in the study with its pedagogical implications can be effectively used in language classrooms. In the process, the learners can also develop cultural awareness and values reminiscent throughout the folktales. Folktales

give the flexibility of creating a variety of engaging activities to cater to different learning styles. Folktales also foster learner's imagination and creativity which greatly enhances the process of learning ESL. However, teaching of ESL has its own objective. Folktales often require certain modification to use in a language classroom so that they suit the objective of specific lessons to augment the emotional, cognitive and language growth of the learners.

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