

## Role of Traditional Stories for English Language Education

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### Abstract

Traditional stories like folktales, fairy tales, myths and fables are different and older in emergence from short stories, a more modern form of narratives. As traditional stories are frequently narrated in Indian multilingual households, they can serve as a rich resource of language learning in the ESL classroom. In this paper I will discuss the potential of traditional stories to facilitate English language education. I shall also elaborate on a host of socio-cultural advantages of using traditional stories as additional language teaching materials for the ESL classroom. I will conclude by providing evidence from Indian ESL classrooms where traditional stories have been found to be an effective pedagogical resource.

**Keywords:** traditional stories, folktales, myths, fables, fairytales, English language education

### Introduction

Traditional stories have a rich tradition of being passed on from one generation to the other in the oral form. There are four types of interesting formats of traditional stories—*folktales*, *fairy tales*, *myths* and *fables*. Their appeal lies in their oral form and their ancient heritage. Thus traditional stories contrast with short stories, which are a recent phenomenon emerging only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, a single author usually writes a short story whereas there is no authorship of traditional stories as they belong to the people. Just look at the term “folktales”: *folk* means people and *tales* means stories.

So they are people's stories. Thus, we have Naga folktales, Nigerian folktales, Tamil folktales, Telugu folktales, Garhwali folktales, and so on. Since in this paper I will discuss the role of traditional stories in ESL teaching, it will be useful to understand the definitions of the four forms of traditional stories. Though all these are usually oral narratives passed on from generation to generation, each has its own set of distinctive features. Folktales are related to the everyday reality of human beings like we find the story revolving around a farmer going to the field to work, or a woodcutter going to the forest to collect wood and others. In fairy tales, fantasy is the dominant element where we meet characters that can be as tall as trees, or can swim seven seas and thirteen rivers in a second. A popular example of a fairy tale is *Alice in Wonderland*. We know how Alice shrinks by drinking the content from a bottle kept in the rabbit hole. Another example is the story of *Bikram and Betal* that tells the tale of an Indian king and a spirit. Since fairy tales are based on fantasy, they are not so much related to everyday reality of human life unlike folktales. Fables are also stories but they have animals and other living beings who act as characters. *Aesop's Fables* and the *Jataka Tales* are examples of fables. Myths have gods, goddesses and supernatural beings as characters and various such examples abound in the Indian epics of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the graphic stories from *Amar chitra katha*. All these narratives are closely linked to the socio-cultural images of a nation and have a deep impact on human life. One common feature that folktales, fairy tales, myths and fables have is that all of them weave stories using local incidents.

### **Storytelling as a Language-Teaching Tool**

Storytelling has been an age-old form of teaching and has been used by teachers from the olden days to educate people. The ancient cave paintings and stone inscriptions show the relationship between story telling and pedagogy and epitomize the rich storytelling tradition of India. Even sages and religious teachers used this form to educate people across different ages. There is a story as to how the *Panchatantra* was written. The story goes like this: A king had three sons. They were not at all motivated to learn. The king was really worried about their education. On the advice of his ministers, he summoned a sage called Vishnu Sharma and explained the problem to him. After listening to the king, Vishnu Sharma promised to educate the three princes. And for that

purpose, he wrote the *Panchatantra* and was successful in educating the princes through the tales he wrote in that book.

Stories have soothing effects on the listeners. In ancient days, when a psychologically disturbed patient went to the medicine man, the medicine man would prescribe medicine and along with it, he would prescribe a folktale to the patient. Even in modern times we use the structure of a story to develop rhetoric and writing. There is a book called *Aesop and the CEO: Powerful Business Insights from Ancient Aesop's Fables* by David Noonan (2005). Here the author uses Aesop's fables to teach business skills to CEOs.

India has a rich tradition of storytelling known as the *Katha* tradition. Indian texts such as the *Jataka* tales, *Suka Saptati*, *Kathasaritasagara*, *Dasakumaracharita* and *Panchatantra* are narratives rich in this form. Even the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are full of stories and all these occupy an important place in our cultural and moral ethos and pedagogy even today. One may ask but all these texts are written narratives. How can they be called folk narratives? The response to this question would be that they were in oral form earlier and were put in the written form much later.

Stories have a number of pedagogic features that facilitate language education (Taylor, 2000; Rinvoluceri & Morgan, 1983). According to these writers, stories can be easily accessed and used as they are available in newspapers, magazines and in children's literature. They can be adapted and used in the language classes too. In places, where technology is not available, the teacher can just narrate stories. They further state that stories infuse interest and excitement in the learners without which a lesson might be considered dry and uninteresting. Stories serve in the maintenance and regeneration of culture. Our cultural practices and traditions are not only documented in stories, but are also passed from one to the other generation. In other words, stories are a good means of enriching cultural literacy and preserving cultural practices.

We use stories because they are widely available. They can be narrated by elders and teachers to the learners. They serve as motivating materials for learners. They are also suitable for use in the language classroom because of their lexical richness. Furthermore, stories are an excellent resource to teach inference generation to young learners. The brevity of a regular story ensures that it does not require more

than one or two sessions. When a learner finishes reading a story, he/she has a sense of achievement. In addition to the potential of stories discussed so far, I would like to specifically elaborate on the advantages of using traditional stories in the language classroom as four significant advantages in the following section. They are discussed as they would serve to raise awareness of Indian ESL teachers and make them more open to using this resource in their pedagogical practices.

### **1. Language Enrichment**

In the field of language education, one of the significant frameworks is that of Willis (1996) as she theorizes that learners require three conditions for language learning: 1. **Exposure** to accessible language, 2. **Opportunities** to use the target language and 3. **Motivation** to learn. Stories readily provide all these three conditions. The text of a story provides exposure to different aspects of language such as syntactical patterns, vocabulary, and communicative use through a narrative discourse. Stories engage the language learners with a variety of activities, which enable them to acquire competence and use the language features in day-to-day life. Stories transcend age barriers and are liked by the young and adults alike. Psychologists believe that storytelling gives a child a play-like experience. Storytelling also brings in a relaxed atmosphere to the classroom. With storytelling, there is no barrier between the teacher and the taught. Thus, storytelling facilitates a stress-free learning environment.

The advantage of a traditional story is that it is well structured and linear in the progression of events. It has a beginning, climax and a happy ending. In contrast, a modern short story may not always follow this structure and can have a reverse order when it can begin from the end. Learners are familiar with the traditional structure because they hear similar stories quite frequently at home. So it is the previous knowledge or schema that helps them comprehend a story well. The structure can help them predict the sequence of events while characters' emotions and intentions can be easily inferred. Thus, using the story grammar (Meyer & Rice, 1984), we can create a variety of tasks to make learners predict the events and draw inferences. One such task would be to ask learners to retell the stories in a language they know well after they have heard the story in English.

We can also use frequently occurring sentence structures present in the

story text and prepare tasks to help learners use those structures for everyday communication. Let us look at an example to achieve such a learning goal. I have written the following story taking the idea from a folktale. The text is written to suit the language learning needs of learners who have exposure to English through the classroom context for two or more years.

Once upon a time there was a crow. One day he got a piece of bread. The crow took the bread in her beak. She sat on the branch of a tree. She was about to eat the bread. Just then a fox came there. The fox saw the crow. He also saw the bread. "I want that bread," he said to himself. He thought of a plan.  
 He said to the crow, "Dear crow, give me that bread.  
 I am really hungry."  
 The crow said, "No, I won't I like bread. I don't like you."  
 The fox thought of a plan. He asked, "*Can you fly?*"  
 The crow replied, "Of course, I can."  
 The fox said, "Then just fly and let me see." The crow flew for a while and sat on the branch. Then the fox asked.  
 "*Can you sing?*" The crow replied, "Yes, I can."  
 The fox said, "Sing then." The crow started, "La-la- la." The piece of bread fell from her beak. The fox took the bread and ran away.

From this text a few sentences can be picked up to teach two structures: (i) simple yes/no questions with use of modals (e.g. *can, do, will*) and (ii) mono-clausal sentences to express *likes* and *dislikes*. Note that the question structures are in italics whereas the answers and expressions of likes/dislikes are mono-clausal sentences and are underlined. Through these two structures we can help learners use them for communicative purposes. They can ask questions to each other to find out their hobbies: "*Can you dance? Can you paint? Do you like to draw? Will you play with me?*" Furthermore, they can also express their likes and dislikes using mono-clausal sentences like "I like painting. I don't like swimming" and so on. Additional grammatical features like converting direct to reported speech can also be taught using the same story. From the above discussion it is clear that traditional stories can facilitate language enrichment. Apart from these, it is possible to design "information gap activities, opinion gap activities and reasoning gap activities" as suggested by Prabhu (1987: pp. 46-47) and such activities are appropriate for communicative language teaching.

Research has shown that like music and dance, storytelling can also be performative and its interactive quality helps in developing students' comprehension and production skills bilingually. For instance I have conducted research to develop language skills of learners using my book (Mahanand & Goswami, 2015) with a group of primary school

learners in Bargarh district of Odisha in 2018. I used ten local folktales and gave them bilingual tasks to develop their language skills with a focus on vocabulary. I taught them reading by using a local folktale called "Topoi" or "Satbahani Kahani" (the story of the seven sisters). The story is about seven brothers and their only sister Topoi. The seven brothers go on business to another country keeping their only sister in custody of their wives. Topoi is ill-treated by her sisters-in-law during this period. When the brothers are back, Topoi complains against her sisters-in-law and her brothers punish them. This is a popular story that the learners were already familiar with.. So when I mentioned the title of the story, they took an immediate interest and exclaimed, " Yes, we know the story!" and were highly motivated to interact. So I asked them to retell the story in Odia and the children were fluent in this task. Then I asked them to read the story in English and followed it by posing some comprehension questions. They could comprehend the questions and they answered in Odia. As a last task they also made attempts to retell the story in English mixing Odia words and phrases. Throughout the exercise the learners took a keen interest in reading the stories and solving the linked language tasks. Consequently, their language skills improved over a period of time.

## **2. Language Awareness Through Interactive Learning**

By reading stories we become critically aware of different uses and expressions of language used in different social contexts and different speech communities. For instance, one can be exposed to the use of double negatives from African folktales. If a character says, "I don't know nothing", he means, "I know nothing." This is a deviated form of language; but by using this we can teach learners the so-called "normal" or "standard" forms. Learners also pick up registers of different domains such as Nature, Mythology, Medicine and Sociology from stories. Take for instance that certain linguistic expressions have come from traditional stories and have become part of our everyday repertoire. For instance, *opening a Pandora's box*, *stepmotherly treatment*, *Cinderella syndrome*, *ugly duckling* have come from folktales/fairytales and are used as everyday expressions even in the present times.

Storytelling is an interactive activity where both the teller and the listener take an active part. Teaching through stories can also be interactive. Here the teacher and the learners interact freely. Interaction

can also happen among the learners themselves. Language awareness about the genre of narration where many dialogues are used, lend a participatory quality that any language teacher can use to generate a lot of discussion in class and develop spoken skills in English or across languages. For instance enacting stories or retelling them can help children use lexical chunks, idiomatic expressions, figurative speech and set phrases (e.g. *at the beginning, long ago, and they lived happily ever after*) to mark plot progression. Furthermore, children can be encouraged to prepare bilingual dialogues and teachers can help them find equivalent metaphors and idioms across languages for example, *a stitch in time saves nine; once in a blue moon; spill the beans* (Bortfeld, 2003). Such activities are interactive, rich in language use for narrative and literary purposes and would help in developing fluency across languages (English and learners' L1).

### **3. Critical Thinking and Literary Appreciation**

By using stories we can develop learners' higher order critical thinking skills. It is generally thought that folktales are meant for enjoyment. But one might have observed that some folktales present certain people in a stereotypical manner. Characters in stories are often presented as cunning, foolish or lazy. Hence learners should learn to read such character portrayals critically by questioning the stereotypical notions and beliefs.. For instance, in Indian folktales, the barber or "Napita" is portrayed as treacherous. He is courteous to the people in the village but reports all cases to the king.

Let me share my experience of teaching critical thinking skills using *English through Folktales: A self-study book* (Mahanand & Goswami, 2015). In this book we included 16 Odiya folktales we had heard orally and recreated them by writing them in English. It was designed to become a supplementary reader to develop all four skills in an integrated manner (sans any overt focus on form teaching): Each tale is followed by comprehension questions with short answers, true/false statements, vocabulary exercise and writing tasks. Let us look at a few comprehension questions that deal with critical thinking skills, which require the learners to go beyond the text to interpret the characters. In one story, a character named Dhramapada is critically interpreted as he embraces death and makes a sacrifice to help sculptors finish building the Konark temple. Three questions are included to involve students in

a critical interpretation of the character: “What bothered the artisans? How did Dharma come to their rescue? Why did Dharma decide to fall down from the temple?” along with a writing prompt: “Write an essay on the character of Dharma.” (pp. 42-49). The discussion on what led Dhramapada to sacrifice his life and what is the relationship of a boy with his parents are issues that students need to respond to using their critical thinking skills. It would make them ask questions and verify facts instead of believing things at their face value. If we don't think critically, we will end up believing what we read or hear. Thus, using stories we can educate learners to analyse characters and appreciate them. Activities of different kinds can be designed to teach social values and enhance critical thinking skills.

#### **4. Inter-cultural Awareness**

Stories as a genre have a great potential in the ESL classroom as they promote “cultural knowledge.” Learners learn about their own culture as well as the culture of other places by reading stories.

*The National Curriculum Framework* (2005) recommends the use of students' local language, traditions, skills including tales and proverbs in the textbooks. Providing children with the home environment is definitely needed to stimulate an interest to learn. The writers of the *Position Paper of National Focus Group on Teaching of English* (2006, p. v) urge for providing an ‘input-rich’ environment. According to these writers, input-rich communicational environments are prerequisites for language learning. They emphasize the art of storytelling and story reading and not so much teaching of stories as texts. Story reading (as opposed to teaching stories as texts) can be developed into a classroom methodology within a Whole Language approach. Reading stories out-aloud, repeated reading, choral reading, story retelling and rewriting activities can draw on and build on the existing language proficiency and skills of teachers. Regular story reading triggers the acquisition process in children and will encourage reading in both the teacher as well as the pupil.

The *Draft National Education Policy* of 2019 adds, India has a rich heritage of ancient knowledge, culture and language as the guiding light for the policy. The policymakers state that using a nation's rich heritage and culture to develop the nation is important. Stories are a potent medium to achieve this as they promote moral values for peaceful coexistence. By

teaching learners through traditional stories we can enrich their experience in class with the precious wealth of knowledge related to Indian culture and heritage. Stories can even be used to teach literary theory. Concepts like power relations in Marxism, Feminism, and Psychoanalytic theory can be explained using stories as examples. Exposure to stories and their various aspects are likely to prompt learners to create stories of their own. Maley (1997) and Wright (1997) have made commendable efforts in this direction. They have been successful in making learners write wonderful stories.

### Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that traditional stories have enormous potential for language enrichment, language awareness and cultural and literary appreciation in the ESL classroom. The familiarity and previous knowledge of learners can drive their anxiety away and motivate them to use languages for real-life communication. We should try to utilize our learners' previous knowledge to teach a language like English which is not available to many of them as a home language. From the above discussion and examples, it becomes believable that traditional stories are a helpful resource material for English language education. It is hoped that both teachers and learners would use such a potential resource. In Telugu language, at the end of the story, the storyteller concludes by saying "katha kanchiki mana muintiki" meaning the story went to Kanchi and we came home. So like that, my story is over for now.

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