Utility of Folktales in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: A Schema Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Folktales offer a unique and effective approach to language acquisition by immersing learners in informal learning environments that emphasize exploration, creativity, and personal interpretation. Unlike traditional, rigid language instruction, folktales engage students with authentic narratives that naturally expose them to the structure, rhythm, and nuances of the target language. These stories provide rich opportunities to learn vocabulary, figurative language, and colloquial expressions in meaningful contexts. Additionally, folktales stimulate imagination and create, activate and accommodateSchemas, which enhances comprehension and retention. By integrating these elements into the learning process, folktales foster a holistic and enjoyable approach to language learning, helping students gain proficiency while developing cultural understanding and linguistic skills.

Keywords: Folktales, Language acquisition, Figurative language, Schemas, Holistic learning

Language and communication are essential elements of human interaction and the sharing of knowledge. Language is a structured system of symbols—whether spoken, written, or signed—that enables individuals to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas. Communication, meanwhile, is the process of exchanging this information, facilitating understanding between individuals and groups.Language and communication are closely tied to culture, reflecting a society's values, traditions, and beliefs.

In understanding and interpreting language, schema theory helps explain how we make sense of conversations by drawing upon prior knowledge (such as recognizing certain phrases or jargon associated with a specific field). Knowledge can be conceptualized as a network of interconnected ideas or propositions that revolve around a central concept while maintaining peripheral links to other related concepts (Gagne, 1986, p. 12). This interconnected structure allows individuals to organize information systematically, providing a foundation for understanding and problem-solving.

These ideas from the prior knowledges are known as schemas.
Research on schemas, such as the work by Pichert and Anderson (1977), demonstrates the critical role of these pre-existing mental frameworks, or schemata, in shaping the way new information is processed, interpreted, and integrated. Schemata serve as cognitive templates that help individuals make sense of unfamiliar material by relating it to what they already know. They guide attention, facilitate comprehension, and influence memory retention.

For instance, when encountering new information, individuals rely on their existing schemata to filter and prioritize details that align with their current understanding. This means that prior knowledge can both enable and constrain learning—while it aids in quickly making sense of information, it may also introduce biases or cause the neglect of details that do not fit into pre-established frameworks. Thus, the organization and activation of schemata play a crucial role in acquiring and consolidating knowledge.

Schema theory is used to understand how people learn and remember information. It suggests that the more relevant or organized a schema, the easier it is to retain new information. For example, when students learn new concepts, they may relate them to existing knowledge schemas to understand and recall better. Language is a constant process of addition and subtraction. While the commonly used vocabulary, expressions, structures, and usages are retained, ones that are not used so often tend to be forgotten. This characteristic of language makes language learning a continuous process, in other words, a never-ending process, in order to retain or regain whatever is learnt or lost, repetitive reading is necessary.

Structured language learning courses or formal language teaching cannot possibly cater to this need as each class or lesson focuses on a specific aspect of grammar or specific functions of usages. Further, in a structured course, it is not always possible to incorporate all expressions, idiomatic usages, permutations, and combinations of sentence structures, vocabulary, and colloquial expressions existing in a particular language. Further, in addition to this, in a structured course, the exposure to the culture, customs, and traditions which used to be in practice or still are in practice is also

very limited, which is due to the control exercised on the context so that the learner does not lose focus of the objective of the lesson.

This is where the folktale-based literary texts prove to be useful as the content of the text is completely random in other words, no control exercised on in terms ofcontext, grammar, and vocabulary, at the same time, exposing the learners to the culture. This random presentation provides the learners with diverse expression, colloquial expressions and sentences structures, which otherwise is not possible while using textbooks that focus on functional and structured learning.

The following characteristics of folktales make it an effective material for language teaching foreign languages.

Oral Tradition
Folk tales are primarily passed down through storytelling from generation to generation, which makes them adaptable and dynamic. Because they were shared orally before being written down, the tales often evolved, with storytellers adding local elements or adjusting plots to suit their audiences. This oral nature contributes to the variation in different versions of the same story across regions and cultures.

Universal Themes
Themes included in folktales are concrete and universal in nature, making them easier to understand as compared to abstract ideas. In folktales, themes are plain and simple - for example, the triumph of good over evil such as killing the tyrant. Inculcating the value of hard work like teaching a lesson to a greedy neighbour, or the pursuit of love that resonate with all humans, making the stories relatable across cultures. When the idea is simple which, the readers can associate with easy, learners can focus more on the language used to communicate the idea. Concreteness makes the understanding part easier, at the same time leaving more energy available for the reader to notice the usage of language. In addition, this concreteness helps the reader understand abstract qualities like greed, cleverness, foolishness, arrogance, etc., that the characters of the folktales embody.

Anonymous Origins
Folk tales don't usually have a single identifiable author. Instead, they are collective creations shaped by many storytellers over time.This anonymity allows the stories to belong to the community, making them a shared cultural treasure.

Moral Lessons
Many folk tales such as The Indian Panchatantra tales are full of wisdom and are designed to teach lessons or reinforce cultural norms. The moral is often stated explicitly at the end or implied through the outcome of the story for example the story of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" teaches the importance of honesty.

Use of Archetypes
Folktales often include archetypical characters, such as the brave hero, the wicked stepmother, the cunning trickster, or the wise elder, are commonly used. These characters embody universal human traits.Heroes like Jack in "Jack and the Beanstalk" represent courage and ambition.Tricksters, such as Jack in the folktale "Jack and the Beanstalk where Jack outsmarts the Giant using his wit which symbolizepresence of mind and resourcefulness.

Elements of Fantasy
Supernatural and magical elements are central to many folk tales, creating a sense of wonder and escapism fairies in European folktales or talking animals that appear in tales like Panchatantra or Jataka tales.

Stock Phrases and Repetition
Repetitive phrases like "Once upon a time" or "And they lived happily ever after" give folk tales a rhythmic quality, making them easy to remember and retell.Events often occur in threes (e.g., "Goldilocks and the Three Bears") or sevens (Snow white and Seven Dwarfs), reinforcing patterns for the audience.

Cultural Reflection
Folk tales serve as mirrors of the societies from which they originate. They reflect the values, struggles, and beliefs of a culture, for example Japanese folktales like "Momotaro" (Peach Boy) depict duty and bravery.

Simple Plot and Structure
Folk tales are straightforward, often featuring a clear problem that is resolved through action or cleverness. One such example is the story of "The Tortoise and the Hare," the story is simple: a race with a moral about persistence.

Happy Endings
Many folk tales end positively, often with the hero overcoming adversity and achieving happiness, which leaves audiences with a sense of hope and satisfaction.The "happily ever after" of fairy tales like "Snow White."

Symbolism
Objects, characters, and events are often symbolic, representing deeper meanings or universal truths, such as the glass slipper glass slipper in "Cinderella" symbolizes purity and uniqueness.

Conflict
Folk tales typically revolve around a central conflict that drives the narrative, whether it's a battle between good and evil, a personal challenge, or a test of character.The conflict between the wolf and the pigs in "The Three Little Pigs" illustrates ingenuity versus brute force.

Folk tales are not just entertainment; they are carriers of cultural identity and human experience, rich with layers of meaning that continue to captivate audiences of all ages.

Predictability
The repetitive structure, key themes, and moral or ethical lessons within folktales not only make them more predictable but also serve to engage audiences and enhance understanding. This predictability can help listeners or readers anticipate events, connect with characters, and internalize the messages.

Simple grammar
Since folktales are passed from generation to generation in an oral tradition, they tend to have short sentences with simple grammar. Simple present tense and simple past tenses are common. Subordinate clauses are uncommon. Simple connectors like "and" "but," etc., are used.

Concrete Vocabulary
Most of the words appearing in folktales are those that can be seen, touched, and felt, making them easier to understand and grasp.

Challenges in foreign language learning
The main challenges faced by the Learner of a foreign Language are: -
- Language differences such as variations in language or vocabulary can hinder understanding.
- Ambiguity in words or phrases with multiple meanings that can create confusion.
- Cultural gaps resulting in differences in communication styles across cultures may lead to misunderstandings.
- Non-Verbal conflicts such as Body language that contradicts spoken words can create mixed messages.

However, most of the challenges are addressed to a large extent as folktales contain simple vocabulary, ideas and elements universal in nature unlike abstract ideas presented in literary texts. This very nature of folktales makes it a versatile and a useful tool that can be employed in a Foreign Language classroom.

Folktales in foreign language teaching
In a foreign language it is crucial to expose the learners to informal reading experiences where they acquire the target language naturally, through meaningful interactions with texts, rather than solely focusing on learning about the language in a theoretical or structured manner. Folktales serve as an ideal resource in this regard, as they not only provide engaging narratives but also act as a rich repository of cultural knowledge and values. This combination makes folktales particularly effective for language acquisition, as they expose students to the target language in a familiar yet imaginative context.

Folktales introduce learners to the natural rhythm, flow, and nuances of a language, offering an authentic alternative to more formal, textbook-based learning. Unlike highly structured lessons that emphasize grammar rules and vocabulary lists in isolation, folktales immerse learners in a narrative context where language is used meaningfully. Through such engagement, learners begin to absorb the structure and patterns of the target language organically, much as they would in a naturalistic setting.

Folktales are rich in literary devices and cultural expressions that serve to enhance both language learning and cultural understanding. Specifically:

1. **Metaphors**: Learners encounter figurative language that expands their ability to understand deeper meanings and concepts expressed in the target language.
2. **Onomatopoeia**: The use of sound words helps students connect language to real-world sensory experiences, making learning more engaging and memorable.
3. **Colloquial Expressions**: Folktales often include idiomatic phrases or regional speech patterns that give learners exposure to conversational, everyday usage of the language.

This exposure helps learners retain, regain, and expand their vocabulary and expressions, as they encounter words in meaningful contexts, which strengthens their memory and ability to use them appropriately.

To fully exploit the benefits of folktales for language acquisition, it is important to prepare learners to actively engage with the text. This process begins in the **pre-reading stage**, where students' ability to imagine, visualize, and activate prior knowledge is developed. Pre-reading activities encourage students to predict and make connections with the story before encountering the text itself, ensuring a more integrative and meaningful reading experience.

- **Imagining and Visualization**: Encouraging students to create mental images based on the story's setting, characters, or themes prepares them to engage deeply with the narrative. This imaginative exercise makes the text more relatable and fosters creativity.
- **Schema Activation**: Learners rely on their existing knowledge (schemas) to interpret new information. By prompting students to activate prior schemas—such as experiences, cultural knowledge, or previously learned vocabulary—they can better understand, and process new language elements presented in the folktale.
- **Schema Accommodation and Acquisition**: When new or unfamiliar ideas arise in the folktale, students expand their schemas by accommodating new information, leading to deeper learning and greater language acquisition

This can be dealt with at the pre-reading stage. The activities could be extracts of the parts of the texts which contain alien cultural entities or the translation of the whole text. It is for the teacher to analyse the text and decide the most effective activity. In my class, I have observed that the learners attempt to understand the reading texts by translating them into English or their own languages. In the process, they start focusing on the words' meanings, sentences, grammar usage, etc., instead of the story, cultural aspects, and the content. In other words, the learners attempt to understand the sentences instead of trying to visualize the situation. The learners spend a considerable amount of time and effort consulting the dictionaries in finding the word meanings and usages, often resulting in demotivation or abandoning the activity in the middle.

CONCLUSION

Folktales provide a unique opportunity to introduce learners to informal learning methods. In contrast to rigid, outcome-focused classroom learning, informal approaches emphasize exploration, enjoyment, and personal interpretation. By engaging with the text through storytelling, group discussions, role plays, or creative writing tasks, students can experiment with the language without the fear of making mistakes. This freedom encourages greater confidence and motivation to use the target language. Incorporating folktales into language learning fosters an integrative, holistic approach to language acquisition.

By immersing students in culturally rich and contextually meaningful stories, folktales promote the retention and expansion of vocabulary, the understanding of literary devices, and the development of colloquial expressions. Strengthening students' imaginative abilities during pre-reading further supports schema activation and visualization, making it easier for learners to connect with and internalize the language. Ultimately, folktales create a natural, engaging, and enjoyable pathway for students to acquire the target language effectively.

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