

Culture in the Classroom and the Language of Folklore

by [Yuka Kuroda](#)

Representation in folklore and folktales reveal much about the particulars of a certain people. The magical realism, as well as the fantastical nature of much of folklore, calls for the audience to allow for a suspension of their sense of reality. Despite this, folktales and folklore often convey a thematic element (a moral, a lesson, etc.) that many concede as being universally accepted human truths. Given this characteristic, these tales have the potential to be understood to a wide degree across cultures; that is to say, folktales convey a cross-cultural, yet often familiar and mutual “language.”

Why Folktales Work for ELLs

Incorporating these tales into the ESL classroom will serve the following purposes:

- to call upon the students’ existing schemata (already existing knowledge), thereby facilitating comprehension of the English text;
- to attempt to lower the affective filter and effectively address the “stage fright” aspect of discourse in the second language; and
- to incorporate culture into the language classroom.

Because a tale pertaining to the students’ native language and native culture will be supported by their schemata (Rumelhart, 1980), the presentation of these tales or the readings thereof, even in English, will be better understood and received by the students than stories without familiar content (Gunderson, 2009). In one study on language comprehension and the cultural background of texts, Iranian students were able to better comprehend a translated but unadapted (i.e., not simplified) text from Iranian folklore than were native English speakers. (Johnson, 1981).

Even when reading a folktale of foreign origins, because these types of tales are often expected to be of a supernatural and magical nature, a sort of common ground is established in this shared understanding, which will also serve to lower the students’ “affective filter” (Krashen, 1987), reducing the “stage fright” aspect of language learning. The idea here is also for the students to engage in cross-cultural discourse, sharing their respective knowledge and broadening their language abilities through opportunities to demonstrate their own cultural expertise.

Given that a reader’s comprehension is significantly affected by content schema, that learners find texts from their own cultures easier to understand, and that the cultural origin of the text and the students’ understanding of the text are directly related (Floyd & Carrell, 1987), implementing a curriculum that focuses on such tales provides a backdrop against which students are able to study the implications of language and culture, and their inherent relationship.

Sample Activities

These activities can be easily adapted to serve as a tool at any level of English learning. At the lower level, students may be asked to share a tale with traditions in their native culture. This can be done with simple words and sentences, and perhaps illustrations to supplement what is semantically lacking; shifting the focus from language to culture will enable the student to lower

their affective filter. At more advanced levels, students may be asked to compose a rendition of a familiar tale, or compare and contrast their respective presentations with those of classmates via oral and written discourse.

Activity 1: “The Girl in White”

Here is an example activity using the Mexican ghost story, “[The Girl in White](#),” focusing on reading at the intermediate level:

Prereading: Give the title of the tale, introducing it as a ghost story. Ask students to share ghost stories with which they are already familiar, especially ones that come to mind when they hear the title, “The Girl in White.” After sharing their own tales, have students brainstorm what this particular tale may be about, based on the title. Their ideas should be written out on the board, on slides, etc., so that the entire class can visibly revisit them.

Reading: During reading, have students mark unfamiliar phrases and words.

Postreading: Compare and contrast the actual tale and the brainstormed ideas from the prereading exercise. As a class, build a word bank of the marked unfamiliar words and phrases. Explain and provide definitions of these words and phrases. Then, have students write a summary of the tale, using at least 10 of the newly acquired words and phrases. As a more challenging exercise, students can be asked to compare and contrast elements of ghost stories from their culture and the one they have just read.

Furthermore, this activity can be easily adapted and expanded so that students may individually compose summaries of tales of their choice, which may then be shared with the rest of the class, in order to facilitate cultural discourse.

Activity 2: Fill-in-the-Blanks Folktales

Another activity that may require more prep time, but that can effectively get each student actively involved, is as follows:

- Invite students to find and bring to class (taken from a book, printed from a website, etc.) a folktale from their respective cultures, or one that they find particularly fascinating. In class or as homework, have students compose a summary of their stories.
- Collect the summaries and original stories, then edit the students’ summaries, making corrections as necessary. Hand back the corrected summaries, then have students submit a typed and revised copy. (This step can be done by the instructor, but having the students correct their own mistakes is ideal.)
- The revised summaries can be distributed to the rest of the class; however, the distributed copies will have “blanks” for some key information. Have each student present his/her story while the rest of the class fills in the “blanks” of the corresponding summary. Examples of a summary and handout with missing information based on the story “[How the Rabbit Lost His Tail](#)” can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively.

Conclusion

Incorporating these tales encourages the opportunity for students to present their own heritage while acknowledging the heritage of others, and being able to do so in the target language. English is used as a mode of mutual correspondence while contextually harboring the students' cultures. If we are to consider the ESL classroom as a cross-cultural arena, the use of folklore and folktales will serve to encourage culture while fostering language acquisition through an effective method that serves both pragmatic and critical functions by means of allowing simultaneous presentation and education of language and culture.

References

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