

# The Benefits of Using Fairy Tales in EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

Use of authentic literature is nothing new to English language classrooms. Teachers who wish to diversify their material and create more engagement with English content have turned to literature as a means to meet this goal. However, fairy tales have often been ignored due to prejudices that either teachers or students have based on modern adaptations of fairy tale content. This paper aims to present the benefits of incorporating fairy tales into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms by showing their value in a cultural and linguistic context. The article reports the overall gains found in using authentic literature in English courses, narrowing in scope to concentrate on fairy tales in particular. After giving a broad description of how fairy tale conventions increase engagement and understanding in English classes, a deeper look into the cultural and linguistic features is added. It is hoped that teachers looking for more options in material selection will find this article useful for justification in using fairy tales in EFL classrooms.

**Keywords:** fairy tales, foreign language learning, second language instruction, narrative structure, narrative context

## 1. Introduction

As education communities around the world assess the consequences of online education during the Covid-19 pandemic, methodologies, base assumptions, and expectations have been put into question once again. Proponents of EdTech as the next phase in the ever-changing cycle of "best methods" have had to confront the fact that the promised land of perfect pedagogy is certainly not at hand. Students are not only disengaged with what is being taught, the static and impersonal aspects of facing a screen for multiple hours a day have left many students feeling bored and lost. This has been especially the case with students learning a foreign language.

As education cycles begin in one place and move to more distant ideas, teachers ultimately end up coming back to the cycle's beginning again. This has been the case of literature use in ESL/EFL curriculums, especially as practiced in a global context (see Membrive and Armie, 2020). What was once embraced in the mid-twentieth century, and then subsequently shunned at the beginning of the twenty-first century for more seemingly advanced methods based on a lack of hard empirical analysis (Maley, 2001), has now returned with greater force as new ESL/EFL instructors take over classrooms. What these instructors are realizing is the connectedness language has to literature, and vice versa. To remove or ignore the literature of the target language is to do a disservice to the overall enterprise of teaching the second or foreign language.

The genres within literature are vast and varied, however the focus of this paper will be on fairy tales. No matter the level in which fairy tales are used, they offer a means in which both the language and cultural content can be accessed in a simple way (Davidheiser, 2007). As most students are familiar with the format of fairy tales, they lend themselves to be more accessible than other written forms. When fairy tales are implemented in language classes, they "provide a glimpse into the values, lifestyles, customs and historical traditions of the target language group" (Haulman, 1985, p. 3). As fairy tales were developed and told to children emphasizing the values, customs, and norms of their cultural group, so too students learning language through fairy tales can get a better understanding of the target language group.

For more academic-minded teachers suspicious of using fairy tales for their inability to be deemed "academic" as compared to textbooks published by major publishers, a deeper understanding of the structure of fairy tales should be looked at. Fairy tales "offer a variety of language contexts appropriate for expanding and refining vocabulary, and for developing a larger repertoire of linguistic structures" (Haulman, 1985, p. 3). Repetition,

vocabulary, verb usage, and other grammatical features are more salient given the concrete contextual nature of the story form. This form is also conducive to the modern technique of building up a narrative to a climax. The familiarity in how a fairy tale is structured lends itself to be comprehended much quicker than dissociated texts.

This paper aims to highlight the cultural and linguistic benefits EFL students can encounter when fairy tales are incorporated in the curriculum. A basic overview of the advantages of using literature in English classrooms will be focused on first. Then a deeper look into fairy tales will be discussed, with prominence given to how they can be justified for use in the curriculum for cultural and linguistic reasons. It is hoped this paper reaches instructors who are searching for more ways to engage their classes and gives a clear basis of justification to incorporate fairy tales in EFL classes.

## **2. Literature Use in ESL/EFL**

As pedagogical research within the realm of second language studies greatly expanded in the latter part of the twentieth century, so too the methodologies developed by those pedagogues. One such approach to the teaching of languages began as a means to ground instruction in the use of more tangible materials in the hope of preparing students to apply their language abilities in the real world. Content-based instruction (CBI) has become one of the leading methods of instruction in language classrooms of all kinds, whether that be English for Academic Purposes, second language workplace training, K-12 classrooms, and English for Specific Purposes, to name a few (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). CBI has enjoyed popularity among students and teachers because of its emphasis on studying about something rather than studying the language explicitly (Davies, 2003). As time has gone on since the development of CBI, offshoots to the larger theory of instruction have progressed independently in certain education markets. The re-incorporation of target language literature into the curriculum has been one of these derivatives from the expansion of CBI.

Since the reemergence of literature as a valid resource for instructing language students, a deeper look into the role of literature, student perceptions of literature, different approaches to literature, and the connection between research and practice has been amply examined (Carroli, 2008). One major discovery is how engagement in classes has been heightened by the contextualized quality of literature. Plots, characters, settings, and themes are all contextualized and work in tandem to make authentic language more accessible (Koushki, 2019). Instead of dialogues without any context to character relationships seen in common course books, literature allows students to see the story as a whole. "Contextualizing language through literature provides English learners with a win-win situation as they delve into themes that enlighten life and language" (Koushki, 2019, p. 140). This allows an easy point of reference in the story which helps to prevent feelings of confusion many students have when reading a piece of writing that has no clear orientation. News articles are an example of this as they require previous knowledge to the topic being written about. Stories are, for the most part, self-contained without requiring an extensive amount of outside information.

A basic feature of literature superior to other forms of writing is the structure stories take with narrative. "Narrative is a way of conferring order and sense upon daily events, discussing boundaries, social norms, standards, beliefs, and gender role models" (Masoni, 2018, p. 640). The unique qualities of conducting classes in the form of a narrative have been extensively examined by practitioners from every corner of the education spectrum (Egan & McEwan, 1995). These instructors emphasize the links between patterns in narrative and how they correspond to patterns of life. A more recent examination of narrative and how it shapes human thought from a neurological and cognitive science perspective has only added to the voices expounding on the need for more narrative-focused instruction (Eakin, 1999). This link between story narratives and how humans think and live their lives has led educationalists to presume that material can be learned and acquired in a much more efficient way.

As motivation and engagement in classroom activities continues to be a major stumbling block for teachers, literature is seen as a simple way through these hurdles. Many teachers can attest to the fact that course books vary in quality and scope, as well as the ability to keep students engaged. When choosing a textbook, authorities are usually concerned about reading skills such as scanning, skimming, inferring, and comprehension, which are all housed under themes the textbook creators find interesting (health, movies, travel, etc.) (Koushki, 2019). As much as administrators find these to be useful or interesting, student may not. Instead of imparting these skills through textbooks, the very nature in how they are written may lead students to tune out or even reject what is being taught for the students' supposed benefit. The vast amount of literature and stories available to teachers far outnumber the limited content textbooks provide. Teachers are given much more control in classrooms as choices to what literature is most appropriate for their specific classes and needs exceeds what would be offered in a handful of textbooks. In one particular case, in using more academic-focused textbooks there is no real

distinction between how the textbooks could (or should) be used in an ESL setting as opposed to an EFL setting. The expectations and overall goals for students in an EFL setting in South Korea compared to foreign students in an ESL setting in the United States require a more decentralized approach to material selection.

The use of literature in language classes as a whole methodological concept has enjoyed favorable comments from many parts of the educational sphere. Within language learning specifically, it has gained popularity among teachers from all over the globe with books being written as to the best methods in instructing literature-based classes (Carroli, 2008; Ghosn, 2013; Lazar, 1993). The innumerable genres within literature available to teachers can cause an overwhelming feeling as choices to content seem unlimited.

One genre from here forward deemed appropriate for language classes is the fairy tale. It has thus been overlooked as a viable means of accessing and interacting with native language, making it ripe for study. The reason for the exclusion of fairy tales within the vast array of research into literature use in EFL/ESL is not entirely clear. They are beloved by children and adults alike, giving them an upper hand when decisions about content are made with an emphasis on motivation. They take a prominent place in bookstores and are adapted into various other artistic forms. As well-thought out the arguments are made about literature use in English classes, and as great as the evidence suggests for their use, there seems to be a persistent void in the discussion. Fairy tales as a legitimate genre have been for too long disregarded, making them a prime target of more advanced study. The following section will spotlight the advantages of using fairy tales in classes, followed by a more detailed look at how fairy tales increase cultural and linguistic awareness. With these insights, it is hoped further research into fairy tales can open the doors to their incorporation into English classes and have a larger hand in improving English skills.

### 3. Fairy Tale Conventions

What make fairy tales so special when compared to the ostensibly unlimited options of literary genres teachers have to choose from? When someone refers to a fairy tale, people most likely imagine princesses, magic, talking animals, and other fantastical things which do not exist in present reality. However, as may be the case in many situations, fairy tales could include folk narratives that reflect the attitudes and situations of the intended audience (Bottingheimer, 2010). For a more detailed description of the differences between folk tales and the various types of fairy tales, see Bottingheimer (2010). For the purpose of this paper, when describing fairy tales, the term will include all these minor variations.

Not all fairy tales need to end with a moral, but many of them do. They are written in such a way to reflect the psychology of the listener/reader whereby meaning can be attained in an effortless way (Bettelheim, 2010). In order to prepare children to enter society with the knowledge of social norms, customs, and values, imparting this information through fairy tales made the task much more effective.

Before continuing, a delineation between fairy tales and poetry should be noted. It is true that some fairy tales are written in a poetic form that rely on rhyme schemes and presented in a poetic structure. The use of children's poetry in EFL classrooms in Korea has been explored previously (Simon, 2019). Many common fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood have been adapted or rewritten as poetry for younger children. However, fairy tales as discussed in this paper are more synonymous with the story-form kind which have a distinct beginning, middle, and end. As considered in the previous section, the type of fairy tale offered here exhibits a narrative structure wherein it reflects the patterns of life for the reader.

A very distinct feature of fairy tales is the unique characters one encounters when reading about far away lands or magical realms. Characters and character traits are simply depicted and archetypal, making character actions much easier to identify (Massi & Adriana, 2001). As students read the fairy tale, comprehension of the text is aided when characters act and talk in an archetypal way. Once the student recognizes the evil queen, all words and actions she displays are set in a pattern students already expect. Whenever the evil queen appears, students can predict something bad or wicked is about to happen. There is no surprise turn or extraneous psychological nuance that may confuse the student as the story progresses. Added to this, students are able to debate the actions and decisions characters make in such fairy tales because of the nature of their stock traits (Wright, 1996, as cited in Massi & Adriana, 2001). It could lead to a more fruitful and engaging discussion in class than if one were to analyze characters with more depth. The students' language ability might not be able to meet the level of analysis needed to explain the actions of a nuanced character.

In relation to the narrative structure of fairy tales, what make them easy to follow and remember is how they are organized. The most common story structure is one where a character struggles, overcomes an obstacle, and copes with the outcome (Masoni, 2018). This is a pattern not only seen in fairy tales, but in all story forms from comic books, television, movies, etc. Each action of a character directly influences the next in a predictable order

that is undemanding for the student to comprehend. Due to the expectedness of story development, unfamiliar vocabulary may be contextually understood and retained in a more straightforward manner than if the student were to read a text with an unpredictable structure. The length of each narrative is also important in that fairy tales are typically shorter than other literary texts. As teachers begin to battle the attention spans of students in the digital age, this is a definite benefit in helping to keep students attentive.

A common complaint one might have of the suggestion of using fairy tales in language classes, especially in adult classrooms, is the view that fairy tales are written for children. Teachers may hesitate to use fairy tales in these classes as they are worried about hurting the pride of their older students by including what is commonly deemed children's literature. Many of the current fairy tales familiar to most, thanks in part to Disney movies reimagining of fairy tales, were not historically written for children specifically (Talley, 2016). Over the course of time many tales were rewritten to meet the needs of new audiences (not unlike what Disney has done), which made them more accessible to a larger reading public. Talley (2016) describes this process as "contamination" whereby original tales were edited into the patterned structures mentioned above. This lends the revised tales to be a good resource for language learners of all levels, no matter the unwarranted prejudice some students may feel when encountering fairy tales in the target language for the first time.

If teachers have not already been convinced of using fairy tales in their language classes from the descriptions of fairy tale conventions, the following two sections will highlight two important features of fairy tales. The first is the cultural awareness students gain from reading fairy tales from target language cultures, and the second is the linguistic benefits when analyzing the text. By focusing on the extralinguistic parts of story in combination with the linguistic breakdown of written texts, teachers will hopefully have enough evidence to convince administrators (or other teachers) to use fairy tales in language classes.

#### **4. Cultural Benefits**

As alluded to previously, context is one of the most important ingredients in any classroom for students to be able to comprehend language adequately. Dialogues are a very common part of many coursebooks and are great for introducing common spoken discourse. Yet what is lacking in many dialogues crafted around target vocabulary is the context of the situation the "speakers" are in. They begin at random moments in time with no real indication as to the relationship between the people speaking. Fairy tales are driven by a narrative structure where characters are introduced and the relationships between them are clearly identified. Contextualization is necessary for any level of language learner if comprehension and acquisition are desired. "Stories effortlessly present to the classroom endless cultural references that would be otherwise difficult to introduce and contextualise" (Masoni, 2018, p. 643). When discussing cultural referents to students who may have no prior knowledge of the cultural item, attempting to explain it in a vacuum does little to help their understanding. If the cultural idea or item were presented in a fairy tale within the context of time, location, and relationships, cultural referents would be much easier to grasp.

As the status of native speakers as prime exemplars of language changes in the new paradigm of World Englishes, the notion of one true English language has virtually disappeared with the rise of globalization (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008). Fairy tales are advantageous in their universal quality because many of the most common stories have been adapted and rewritten in different cultures. Fairy tales provide "us with an array of different versions of varied geographical and cultural provenance, which we can employ for comparative purposes in teaching" (Masoni, 2018, p. 643). Comparing the English language and culture with the native language and culture is a standard practice in many language classes. What fairy tales allow teachers, on the other hand, is to compare different English language texts from different points of view and elucidate the variances. Especially for more advanced or adult learners of English, recognizing how one native speaking community values certain ideals differently from another native speaking community only strengthens their knowledge of the language as a whole.

Customs and historical traditions of the English language group are necessary components in teaching English. If students are unaware of sensitivities in the cultural community, it could cause embarrassment when students attempt to use the language meaningfully with the community. "They are the packaged values and expectations of the culture, and are designed to be appealing, making them engaging for students" (Talley, 2015, p. 33). Fairy tales provide a window into what the language community values and how they live (Haulman, 1985). They offer students a chance to see how speakers of English interact in their environment and what truths they hold. Obergfell (1983), when discussing the use of fairy tales in French classrooms, has described this process of cultural awareness as learning about the mentality of the language group.

Beyond an emphasis on the English language community, fairy tales can be used to illuminate the culture inside

the classroom as well. Fairy tales can be read silently in reading classes, but one of the hallmarks of fairy tales is the fun in telling them aloud. This performative action brings together the teller and the audience to share in the collaborative act (Masoni, 2018). In the move to cooperate as one class, shared values and norms would need to be discussed and agreed upon. Fairy tales can be used as a jumping off point to begin discussions about how the students see themselves in the class, school, or society at large.

### **5. Linguistic Benefits**

A familiar worry teachers have when contemplating the use of fairy tales is the language being employed. The level of difficulty can be varied depending on the fairy tale and when it was written. A study by Rufenacht, McCarthy & Lamkin (2011) was conducted to find out if fairy tales were equivalent to ESL reading materials when examined linguistically. They compared 50 fairy tales, 100 ESL texts, and 150 baseline texts using a Gramulator to determine how similar or different fairy tales were to material written for ESL classrooms. They found there was a high correlation between fairy tales and ESL texts; that fairy tales contained structures similar to ESL texts, and that fairy tales also resembled baseline texts. Based on these findings, they concluded that the use of fairy tales was justifiable in second language classrooms given the similarity in linguistic style and features they exhibited when compared to ESL materials.

Recognizing that fairy tales are linguistically equal to systematic texts to learn English, teachers can now tackle the much-dreaded grammar lesson with confidence. Fairy tales "can be used to highlight past tense, regular and irregular verbs, and then feature present tense or imperatives when dialog is added" (Koushki, 2019, p. 141). Fairy tales are also replete with vivid descriptions of people, places, and things, which flood the students with rich adjectives. There is no shortage of grammar features in many fairy tales, and as explained before, in a narrative context these features become much more salient. It is more engaging to identify and work with grammar in context than with detached grammar lessons offered in course books.

Vocabulary instruction is another hurdle that many teachers stumble over when given static textbooks to work with. Words are usually given in isolation with definitions the students might not understand either. The advantage of presenting vocabulary through a fairy tale is the ease in which abstract or complex words can be defined within the context of the story. "Poignant narrative contexts somehow guide words into their allotted space of meaning within our mind" (Masoni, 2018, p. 648). Due to the familiar pattern and pacing of fairy tales, unfamiliar words are easily identifiable when seen in the sentence, paragraph, and part of the overall story. Role-specific language is also important in demonstrating how certain words or phrases are used by particular people in certain situations (Haulman, 1985). For example, the innkeeper in "The Three Apprentices" by the Brothers Grimm has a different way of conversing than the merchant or any of the apprentices. This could possibly lead to a class discussion on different vocabulary and ways of speaking depending on occupation.

Linguistic features such as metaphors, idioms, and phrasal verbs are also prominent in fairy tales. Phrasal verbs are used in English speech much more than commonly thought, yet they are hardly explicitly taught. Many students find listening to English much more difficult than reading for a variety of reasons, yet phrasal verbs could be identified as one of the culprits. If students are given an opportunity to explore phrasal verbs, metaphors, and idioms through fairy tales, they would be much more prepared for authentic English speech. Studying stilted dialogue from coursebooks are not only unhelpful, they may even turn the student off from continuing to study English.

### **6. Conclusion**

The use of second language literature in EFL classes is having a much-needed resurgence during this contentious time in education. Assumptions about the future of pedagogy has had to be reassessed due to the effects of Covid-19 on the EFL world. Second language literature is being looked at with fresh eyes as a familiar way to engage students into the larger world of English.

Fairy tales are important literary icons in the English-speaking world. They were some of the first stories written in English and have continued to enchant people of all ages. Thus, they are an invaluable resource for English classrooms when looked at from a cultural lens. Fairy tales offer valuable references which would be more difficult to encounter in stilted textbooks. They allow students to make comparisons of not only their culture with the target language, but between different target language cultures as well. Some tales may even be used to initiate self-reflection as students think about their roles and actions in society.

From the narrative structure to the context fairy tales bring out of the language, they are a sharp tool in the English teacher's toolkit. Grammar lessons could be conducted in a more engaging way as students fall into the fun and enchantment of fairy tales. From vocabulary to more specific grammatical features such as idioms,

phrasal verbs, and metaphors, fairy tales offer a stronger guide into the use and appropriateness of these forms as they are presented in context.

This paper sought to highlight some of the benefits of using fairy tales in EFL classes. It is hoped that teachers who are searching for material that is more engaging than textbooks will have found some of the arguments in this discourse useful. As is always the case, not every EFL class could or should immediately drop whatever is being studied and substitute fairy tales instead. Consideration should be taken as to the goals of the English class and the outcomes expected. It would be ill-thought to incorporate fairy tales in a class strictly devoted to a certain skill in passing high-stakes English tests. However, for teachers instructing general EFL courses at all levels, fairy tales would fit as perfect as Cinderella's glass slipper.

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