



**USING FOLKTALES IN LITERATURE CLASSROOM FOR LOW LEVEL STUDENTS**  
**İNGİLİZCE DÜZEYLERİ YETERSİZ OLAN ÖĞRENCİLERDEN OLUŞAN EDEBİYAT**  
**SINIFLARI İÇİN HALK HİKAYELERİNİN KULLANIMI**

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**ÖZ**

İngilizce dil seviyelerinin başlangıç ve daha alt düzeylerde olan öğrencilere zorunlu olarak öğretilmekte olan İngiliz edebiyatı dersinde sıkça karşılaşılan sorunlardan biri edebi türlerin seçimidir. Okul programlarında yaygın olarak konulan klasik edebiyat türleri olan romanlar, şiirler ve büyük ölçekli drama oyunları, öğrenciler için, gerek okuduğunu anlamada, gerek dört dil becerisi gelişimi, gerek okullarda materyal ve araç gereç yetersizlikleri bakımından ve birçok nedenlerden dolayı büyük zorlukların ve sıkıntılı yaşanmasına sebep olmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, edebi türü olan halk hikayeleri, edebiyat programlarına konulup kullanıldıklarında, öğrencilerin duygusal, zihinsel, sanatsal, sosyo-kültürel ve psikolojik gelişimleri açısından daha doğru bir seçim olacağı kabul edilmektedir.

**Anahtar kelime:** halk edebiyatı, halk hikayeleri, edebiyat öğretimi

**ABSTRACT**

One of the most frequently encountered problems in teaching of English literature to low level students concerns the selection of an adequate literary genre for reading. School curriculums usually tend to mandate the use of canonical literature with literary genres such as novels, poetry and large-scale plays, which generates serious problems in terms of students' development of reading comprehension and of four language skills. In addition to these and many other problems, there is also the problem of insufficiency in teaching and learning materials. From this perspective, folktales seem to present an ideal resource for teaching English literature for low level students. When utilized in school programs, as has been widely acknowledged, they have beneficial effects on students' emotional, intellectual, artistic, socio-cultural and psychological development.

**Keywords:** folktales, folk literature, literature education

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Studying English literature can be a daunting challenge, especially for learners whose proficiency in English is nowhere near the minimum level requirements necessary to tackle such a serious discipline of the realm of humanities as it demands a tremendous amount of prior preparation in terms of the socio-cultural and linguistic background.

In this context, teaching English literature to foreign students with elementary levels of proficiency becomes a real challenge for teachers. Many non-native students are no exception to this. Just as they climb up the ladder of primary and secondary education all the way up into high school, for some kinds of reason, maybe due to system errors, they fail to move beyond the beginner level in what concerns the subject of English studies. The question, thus, is what to do with them? How to teach English literature to low level students? Real classics or even literature for adolescents are too sophisticated for them because of the high-born style, vocabulary and deviating turns of expression. It is not easy to ensure a sustained concentration on lengthy texts like novels. As Collie and Slater (1987, 36) remark, a lengthy text "... leaves little time for anything but the reading itself". Teachers often complain of having to deal with such problems as student indifference, resistance and lack of skills. Giving a reading assignment for a lengthy text is almost a guarantee that most of them will not be able to accomplish it or will attempt to do shortcuts like cheating through infinite resources available on the Internet. As Tovani (2004, 40) remarks, "If we are constantly giving students text that is too hard for them to read, they may get through it, but probably not without cheating". Neither children literature nor literature for adults seem to be suitable for them as these might not be interesting, challenging and motivating enough for them. It seems not possible to use these genres for the beginner level. Teachers, who have to comply with curricular demands, are in an awkward situation as they are compelled to teach English

literature to students completely inadequate to tackle with complex works. They have to come up with ideas as how to make the aesthetic process of literature learning less painful for both them and the students. In a response to this question, a great deal of research study suggests using short stories like folktales for literature classes as the easiest way into the realm of world classics. Campbell (2007, 2) describes short stories as “a way into literature for most students.” Collie and Slater (1987, 196) also indicate that short stories are “often an ideal way of introducing students to literature ...”. Taylor accomplished a very successful experiment using folktales with Asian immigrant students (Taylor, 2000). Alongside with the enthusiasm and interest it raised, he noticed the overall positive effect it produced on their vocabulary and language development. Folktales present a very interesting type of literary work and might be worth trying with low level students.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The simplicity of the notional and linguistic texture, the motivating vigour, captivity and integrity of the storyline, the universality of topics and themes, the operant practicality all add up to the beauty of folktales and make them look really appealing to use as the first step into the world of literature in a foreign language. Campbell (2007, 3) noticed that the more complex literary genre of novels was a source of resentful frustration for her junior high students who did not feel comfortable as they had to retain too many details and felt “overwhelmed by the complexity of the multiple characters, settings, and plot twists.” As many research studies suggest, literature curriculums need to provide a wide selecting choice for reading to make literature and reading relevant for students (Bean, 2002; Langer, 2001).

Folk literature can have a significant impact on students’s lives as it touches upon a number of relevant issues which are part of their world. Folktales provide social and cultural experiences as well as give moral messages to their audience. Repetitiveness of structural patterns, the artistic and poetic beauty of rhythm, intonation and stress are all excellent means for building and consolidating vocabulary, grammar knowledge and native-like pronunciation. Folk literature provides exactly that kind of rich context that Collie and Slater (1987, 5) emphasize as vital for making language items more memorable.

Raising awareness for different cultures helps develop empathy and understanding for others. What is greatly important about folktales is that they allow to make in easier ways contrasts and comparisons with their own culture as they contain a great deal of elements pertaining to universal values and incontrovertible truths which are common to most cultures. Weber (cited in Bredella and Delanoy, 1996, 236) describes short stories as “intermediaries between the target culture ... and the non-native readers”.

They are indisputably precious for values education which, as it has been frequently remarked, has been one of the serious flaws of modern education. Putnam (1964) emphasizes the importance of values education:

By learning to distinguish between that which is genuine and that which is not, between that which has significant cultural value and that which is tawdry, pupils may gain greater perspective for developing their sense of values.” (367)

Because of their background in oral tradition, they are most fit for comprehension-based learning than other literary genres with roots in written tradition. Among the numerous qualities of folktales one can list such as easy language, interesting story-lines, simple plots and pictures illustrating the context. Folktales seem to be perfectly fit for level-adjusting and textual simplifications. And they are ideal for the best use of the limited classroom time.

Reading and understanding literature naturally requires a higher level of cognitive and academic skills. In a literature class, students are frequently asked to accomplish routine tasks that involve the use of such skills as analyzing, summarizing, inferencing, eliciting, commenting, criticizing, drawing conclusions and identifying the ideas explicitly or implicitly stated in the text. Unlike novels, folktales seem to be well suited for this kind of tasks. Putnam (1964, 367) points out at the potential values of folklore resources due to the intrinsic quality of their art forms which help “stimulate an understanding and appreciation of many types of artistic expression”. Because of the very nature of folktales, one can easily see the intertwining and overlapping of their territory with that of other fields such as sociology, history, religion, philosophy and anthropology (Taylor, 2000, 3). The infinite potential of folktales makes it possible to use them as the first step into learning of the art of rhetoric. They come out as naturally flowing articulations of speech producing process without making someone feel impelled to memorization. In this quality, in particular, they seem ideal as a learning material allowing to avoid going too much into traditional methods of teaching such as rote learning, practice-based pattern drills, and memorization.

Folktales, for their most part, are anonymous artifacts which have matured over centuries and come about by word of mouth through generations. They have become the founding stock and inseparable part of the traditional cultural lore. Learners do not have to reflect on them in terms of the author background. Since no one knows who the original author was, folktales are open for use to anyone and can be fully integrated into literature courses without the need to go through all the trouble related to author rights. Teachers can draw as much as they want from the vast pool of literary folklore heritage according to their individual or collective needs, as well as specific teaching contexts.

Folktales are beautifully varied in style, theme and subtypes. Fables, as a subtype of folktales, are very convenient for use with low level students as they are even shorter, employ animals as main characters and contain a simple moral message usually explicitly articulated in one sentence at the end. The famous fables by Krylov, a Russian fable writer, are particularly exemplary in this respect. Folktales that come from a mixture of mystical, religious and folkloric traditions set another example that testifies to a variety of subtypes, themes and styles. The Nasreddin Hoja stories can be successfully employed with Asian students of Muslim background as they are very popular in Islamic cultures. Oscarsson (1992) who used Haitian folk literature for her Haitian immigrant students, noticed a remarkable interest and a significant increase in their academic achievements.

### 3. THE TYPOLOGY OF FOLKTALES

Folktales are easily recognizable for common patterns and characteristic features. To cite a slightly adapted version of some of them from Taylor (2000, 9):

- ✓ Time-ordered structure
- ✓ Repetitions
- ✓ Predictability
- ✓ Vocabulary
- ✓ Illustrations
- ✓ A reader-writer relationship

#### 3.1 Time-Ordered Structure

Many cultures employ the same time-ordering patterns when presenting a folktale story. The events in a story follow a specific sequential pattern: *once upon a time ... , first ... , second ... , third ... , next ... , then ... , after that ... , finally ... , at the end ...* . Time is arranged following a straight chronological timeline quite simply and usually with the use of either Simple Present or Simple Past Tenses, or both. It is rare to see such complex tenses as Past Perfect, Past Continuous and Future in Past of which the meaning would be difficult for beginners to grasp.

#### 3.2 Repetitions

Coming from oral tradition, folktales abounds in repetitions of thematical, structural and ideological patterns. In *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* each encounter of the boy with the imaginary wolf, except for the last scene, follows the same pattern: He cries “Wolf!”, the men hurry, he says “He ran away”, and the men go back to the village. And over and over again. In *The Man, the Boy and the Donkey* repetitions are equally abundant. Each encounter of the main characters with passers-by sets the same event pattern in motion. The same phrases are being stated and re-stated over and over again: the man keeps saying to the boy either “Get on the donkey!” or “Get off the donkey!”, the boy keeps either getting on or off the donkey; the man himself keeps getting on and off the donkey; finally it is the donkey that gets on both the man and the boy and ends up drowned in the river under the bridge<sup>1</sup>.

#### 3.3 Predictability

Due to the frequent repetitions of event patterns, it becomes much easier for learners to grasp the main idea of the text as they are being automatically set in the mood of predicting of what will happen next. With each forthcoming event the reader makes no mistake at predicting when the boy will cry for wolf or when the man will ask the boy to get off the donkey. Moreover, learners are prompted to draw moral conclusions before even getting to the final sentence of the story. By guessing they can already attribute certain moral qualities to the main characters. They can describe the boy in *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* as deceitful and wicked, and the man in *The Man, the Boy and the Donkey* as foolish and stupid. The various connections and associations that

<sup>1</sup> Note: The folktales mentioned here are all widely known stories. So they are not included in this article.

readers make in their minds are very simple and straightforward without temperamental and psychological complexities of character and personality. They take for granted that the lazy, stupid, greedy, arrogant and insolent will always lose while the wise, miserable, poor, persevering and hardworking will always win at the end. And not the other way around.

Different cultures often tend to present similar characters and personalities with the same qualities. Thus, the wolf is often associated with wickedness, the horse with hardwork, the fox with trickster, the princess with beauty, the step-mother with jealousy, and the prince with valour and courage. Yet some differences might be in the physical appearances of characters. The princess in Western tales is usually a blonde beauty with long wavy hair and big blue eyes, dressed according to European fashion styles, whereas an Asian princess is a typical reflection of Eastern cultural representations of feminine beauty with long black straight hair and black or brown, slightly slanting eyes. Being predictable, these cultural associations are very helpful to enhance comprehensive reading and understanding of the textual material.

### 3.4 Vocabulary

Folktales are ideal for representing abstract ideas through tangible and concrete notions that directly appeal to the five human senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. It is much easier to learn vocabulary words and word groups when real-life images of them are instantly created in the reader's mind without straining too much the mental effort required for the creative process.

Concrete ideas lead to understanding of abstract notions. For instance, *The Man, the Boy and the Donkey* instantiate and exemplify human stupidity. *The Turtle and the Rabbit* exposes foolishness of arrogance and self-inflated pride on the one hand, and the wisdom of humble perseverance, steadiness and 'don't give up the fight' attitude on the other. As Taylor (2000, 14) points out, "This representation of abstract ideas in very concrete images makes folktales excellent for teaching abstract vocabulary."

### 3.5 Illustrations

Folktales are usually accompanied with colour-rich illustrations making the stories more appealing and reader-friendly as they put the reader's mind at ease by enhancing the reading comprehension. For low level learners the comprehension is eased as they can clearly see the main idea of the text from the pictures provided. Sometimes they can even retell the whole story by simply commenting on the illustrations. A great deal of information can be elicited by analyzing illustrations: main characters, their physical appearances, their personal qualities, plot of the story, the environment, the setting, the main and supporting ideas and the like. Illustrations serve as a support for understanding not only of the vocabulary of the text but of the context as well.

### 3.6 A Reader-Writer Relationship

It is commonly accepted that readers of, more or less, serious literature come to accept the authority of the writer as a teacher of factually undeniable truths. With folktales it is not like that. Being anonymous for their most part, the reader finds himself on an equal footing with the writer, not as an authority but as an equal partner in all rights. It is up to the reader to decide whether to agree or disagree with the writer; accept or reject the moral message conveyed by the story. The story of *The Man, the Boy and the Donkey* can be retold and analyzed from a quite different perspective than the previous one. Among the most famous tales of Nasreddin Hoja there is one almost identical. It is entitled *The Criticism of Men*. Most of the events and characters are the same as in *The Man, the Boy and the Donkey*, except for the last scene in which the donkey gets drowned. The same characters are present, the same events unfold: the man, the boy, and the donkey; the gettings on and off the donkey; the encounters with different people all bear striking resemblance with the Western version of the tale. Yet in *The Criticism of Men* it is not the foolish behaviour of the main character, the man, that is being exposed to ridicule but rather the harsh and cruel criticism of all the other people he meets on his way. The moral lesson given by this version is that it is hard to escape the critical eye of public opinion. In this example of the two versions of the same story the reader is left alone to decide whose perspective to agree with. In *Money that Blows the Whistle* (another Nasreddin Hoja tale) the reader gets easily perplexed at to what to think of the moral message that is being conveyed in it. He is even led to think of the main character as being a cruel person who is very harsh in his treatment of little children.

To the common characteristic qualities of folktales there can be added another three: role-playing, implicit grammar learning and operant practicality.



### 3.7 Role-Playing

Folktales are ideal for acting out. The simplicity of the plot, the chronological time-ordered structure, concrete ideas, repetitiveness of thematical and event patterns, few and simple characters all contribute to the success of any amateur-staging experiment with the text. It has been attested by innumerable research that role-playing and drama play an important role in students' development of communicative skills and empathy, and supports the increase of their self-confidence. The context that folktales provide is ideal for role-play situations

### 3.8 Implicit Grammar Learning

One of the wonderful characteristics of folktales is that students do not have to go through the exhaustive and meaningless drill of grammar rules. Certainly, they do have to learn some grammar, especially at the beginning stages of foreign language learning, but with folktales this task seems somehow tolerable and easy as it teaches grammar with non-invasive means, in other words, indirectly. Implicit grammar learning has been preached over the last decade in the scholarly publishing of well-known authorities on language learning.

Simple grammar involving the use of simple past and simple present tenses; the limited use or absence of subordinate clause; simple connectors and prepositions such as *and ...*, *but ...*, *with ...*, *next to ...*, *on ...*, *under ...*, *behind ...* and the like all make it much easier for low level learners to learn grammar rules in a beginner-friendly mode and get prepared for the next stage of more complex grammar structures and patterns.

### 3.9 Operant Practicality

Folktales, being very short stories, are very convenient materials for reading in a literature classroom. The very shortness of the text makes them invaluable as a resource for classroom reading. Teachers do not have to worry and get frustrated about whether their students would fulfil their reading assignments at home or simply abandon the whole work altogether. As it turns out, they can accomplish their reading assignments without leaving the classroom. Classroom reading is very beneficial for low level students. The reading process is teacher controlled and reading comprehension gets a constant and regular feedback-based support both on the part of teacher and classmates. The teacher may explain the most difficult expressions and structures, or complex vocabulary that low level students usually tend to encounter and get stuck with in any text, no matter how short it is. In other words, most of the hard work gets accomplished in the classroom to everyone's satisfaction.

In addition, many folktales have been screen-written and are available as audio-visual aids, animation films and videos. There are also plenty of graphical representations of folktales. All these make them an invaluable source for literature learning for beginners.

## 4. CULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

Folktales lay a multi-dimensional perspective and insight into various social, psychological, cultural and ideological issues. They address a number of issues that present relevance to the moral concerns of modern education: poverty, violence, hatred, death, child abuse and mistreatment, loss of home, loneliness and isolation. They touch upon the dialectics of the eternal themes of the good and evil, war and peace, justice and inequality, greed and generosity, betrayal and loyalty, revenge and forgiveness.

Folktales help learners look at the world not only from their own perspective but also from the perspective of others. This enables them to develop a more tolerant attitude toward foreign cultures and peoples. Folk literature helps build cultural bridges through stories that tell the life of us and others.

Proverbs, idioms and figures of speech are all closely connected with folk literature. Students are often curious about the origins of particular idiomatic expressions both in their culture and the foreign one. These are in fact the summarized version of the moral lesson given by folktales.

There are aspects of cultural traditions and customs related to the important themes in people's lives: holidays, celebrations, marriage, wedding, music, funerals, mourning over the dead, representations of death, birth delivering, feeding the baby, birthdays of children, worshiping of God (or Gods), church- (mosk-, temple-) going habits, food-related and cooking customs, dressing codes, family and household issues. All appear to be the common themes of many cultures. Folktales do not only help to learn a language, but they also help to get a closer look at the people and culture behind this language.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn about the use of folktales for low level students. The ultimate goal in teaching is to produce life-long readers who read not only because they are required to, but because they want to, whatever the reasons there might be. They might read to raise their grades; they might read for pleasure and fun; they might read out of curiosity; they might read to train their mind; they might read for cultural understanding. In contrast to Anderson's (2005) description of canonical literature as "high barriers and high standards" which students often find themselves incapable to overcome, folktales seem perfectly suitable for achieving this goal.

Folktales present a moderate challenge for students which is an essentially critical requirement for children's cognitive and psychological development as is indicated by a number of educational studies. Jensen (1998) and Vygotsky (1978, 1996) point out that students learn best when they face a moderate challenge. It is only then that students can really use their minds and engage in the thinking process of reading rather than simply have their eyes move cursorily across the words on the page.

Curricular programs have to incorporate folk literature, and folktales in particular, because of "the intellectual, emotional, artistic and social benefits it offers to the pupils and to the teachers" (Putnam, 1964, 368). As a part of cultural heritage, folktales, especially those coming from local culture, need to be preserved and taught to bring greater meaning into students' lives.

Folktales from different cultures have so many things in common that sometimes one starts to think that they are actually from one's own culture, the part of one's own family. They are the life lessons that invite everyone to participate and share. The fun they bring is an added value. Having much to do with childhood memories they are a source of healthy childish delight and enthusiasm which is a good rationale why they should be used in a literature classroom.

Folktales offer a different approach to literature teaching. By bringing folktales into the classroom, teachers can change their classroom practices if they are serious in their wish for real learning. Folktales are very accessible texts allowing students to connect with them, to become familiar with different ideas and cultures.

Literature anthologies should be flexible enough to allow a great choice of title selection and should incorporate folktales from different cultures and from one's own. In this respect, students are the best guides to the selecting of titles for classroom and home reading. Serving as a bridge into more complex literature the use of folktales should be genuinely supported in this respect.

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