MORE THAN “GOOD GUYS VS. BAD GUYS”: WISDOM FROM FOLKTALES AS ORAL LITERARY TEXTS

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DOI: 10.24815/..v1i1.14395

Abstract

Folktales are part of folk literature manifesting the cultural heritage of a people. They are traditional stories that have been passed on by word of mouth before writing systems were developed. In the modern world, there seem to be a misperception that these tales are only for the child audience. Here I will first introduce folktales as oral literary texts and argue that the wisdom we can draw from folktales goes beyond understanding the triad narrative structure and “good guys vs. bad guys” struggles. While folktales do appeal to children and help them develop critical, social, cognitive, and linguistic skills; the themes and issues raised in these tales can be significant for all ages and all humanity, and relevant even in the 21st century. With some examples of contrastive analysis of narrative structures and contents from folktales of Myanmar and a few other cultures, I will discuss the richness of these oral literary texts and how they can be used in and beyond language teaching.

Keywords: Folktales, oral literary texts, narrative, culture.

1. Introduction: Folktales as Oral Literary Texts

Folktales are part of folklore or folk literature. Folklorists have labelled myths, legends and folktales, as major narrative genres (with some overlaps among them). In general, myths are stories that are considered sacred, legends are more secular recounting of actual events, and folktales are narrative regarded as fiction (Eugénio, 1995). Simply put, folktales are traditional stories that have been passed on by word of mouth before writing systems were invented. They include fables (i.e. tales with animals as the main characters and an explicit moral lesson) and fairy tales (i.e. tales with some magical elements), among many other sub-types. Like other forms of literature, folktales call for readers/listeners to have a certain degree of suspension of disbelief about their fictitious characters and events. Folktales also have the characteristic of literary creativity, such as manipulation of linguistic forms to create certain effects. For example, folktales typically include novel words, onomatopoetic sounds, and repeated or paralleled phonological or grammatical patterns that create interesting rhythms.
As part of folk literature, folktales manifest the cultural heritage of a people. The functions or social purposes of folktales range from preserving the culture of a civilization and explaining natural phenomena, to transmitting historical and important social information and teaching important moral and ethical issues (Taylor, 2000). Folktales of a culture are usually preserved as oral literary texts and part of a long folk tradition reflecting the lives, experiences and wisdom of the people in the culture. It has been claimed that “[a] knowledge of folk literature is of prime importance for a fuller understanding of human behaviour and culture” because it is in the folk literature that we can find the cultural heritage, i.e. the roots and culture, of that people (Eugenio, 1995, p. 1).

While folktales have traditionally served various social purposes for people of a culture, their roles in the modern world seem to have been relegated to stories for children. With the development of writing systems and other forms of technology, oral tales from various cultures have been transformed into written forms. Along with the writing down of folktales which has led to a fixed choice of words for child audience so that they can be used as a way to introduce children to literature, some have become part of the canon of children’s literature. Consequently, there seem to be misperceptions that these tales are only for the child audience, and that they are all about “good guys vs. bad guys” struggles to teach children moral lessons.

Indeed, folktales do appeal to children due to their relatively simple forms of language and a simple storyline or narrative structure with proper beginning, middle and end. Also, children are often attracted to memorable rhythms in folktales created by the “magic three” times repetition of certain words, phrases or sequences of events. However, despite the outwardly simple appearance, folktales address themes and issues that are profound for all humanity. It touches on such psychologically significant themes of love, courage, hope, fear, honesty, kindness, generosity, jealousy, arrogance, greed, and so forth. The themes and issues raised in oral tales can be significant for all ages and all humanity, and relevant even in the 21st century. The wisdom we can draw from folktales as oral literary texts goes beyond understanding the triad narrative structure and the good vs. the evil. In what follows, I will present the richness of these oral literary texts and ways in which they can be used in and beyond language teaching, drawing on my recent works on folktales and oral storytelling (Lwin, 2009, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

2. Mining the Wisdom from Folktales

Given that folktales represent the culture of a people using simple yet creative forms of language, they are both linguistic and cultural products which can provide learners with opportunities to explore the language and culture simultaneously. It is not uncommon to see in mother tongue or first language classes the use of folktales written or told in the mother tongue or first language as teaching resources to instil the desirable moral and cultural values that are inherent and preserved through language in the society. Therefore, by listening to and reading these tales, as well as speaking and writing about them in the mother tongue or first language, learners not only develop language skills but also get socialized into the culture. For example, through these tales, they learn about culturally acceptable ways of performing speech acts (e.g. requesting, agreeing, disagreeing, refusal, etc.), as well as speaking and writing about the people, events and things which are considered prevalent in that culture (e.g. their staple food/drink, key festivals, the most common birds/animals/games, etc.)

Looking beyond folktales of one specific culture which are written or told in the native language of the people in that culture, one can find publications of collections of folktales
from different cultures written in English. Especially in the Asian context, where societies have a rich oral history, folktales have been preserved for generations not only as a reflection of a particular culture but also as a means of instilling certain concepts in the society. Efforts are also made to disseminate the rich folk literature from different countries in Asia by collecting and publishing collections of Asian folktales in English. For example, in his collections of Burmese (Myanmar) folktales, Maung Htin Aung (1948, 1976) stated that these tales were collected and (re)written in English in order to further the appreciation of Burmese (Myanmar) culture by English-speaking readers. Similar collections of folktales of other Asian/ASEAN nations have also been available in English, e.g. Indonesian folktales (Bunanta, 2003), Thai folk tales (Jumsai & Luang, 1977), 366 A collection of Malaysian folktales (Puteh & Said, 2008), Chinese folktales (Chin, Center & Ross, 1989), Indian folktales and legends (Nath, 2016), Telling tales from Southeast Asia and Korea (Wajuppa, 2010), and ASEAN folk literature (Eugenio, 1995). In most cases, folktales of a culture published in English represent works by scholars from the respective culture who are bilingual/multilingual speakers of English and who took on the task of selecting the most representative or popular examples of folktales from the cultures and re-writing them or translating them from the oral form into written English. Thus, these publications of folktales in fact represent diverse cultures and users of varieties of English. This characteristic has made folktales a useful resource to expose learners of English to varieties of English, and help them understand the role of English as a lingua franca.

Moreover, the existence of folktales from different cultures written in English has made it possible to do a comparison or contrastive analysis of folktales from two or more cultures so that similarities and differences among them can be examined. Based on such comparisons or contrastive analyses, one observation which can be made about folktales around the world is that they manifest universal themes and strikingly similar narrative structures. For instance, Lwin (2010) have highlighted prominent patterns of structural similarities among folktales of different cultures. Some of these patterns include:

- **Reward/Punishment**
  
  Protagonist A: Task → Success → Reward  
  Protagonist B: Task → Failure → Punishment  
  e.g. *Golden Crow* (Myanmar tale), *Hungbu and Nolbu* (Korean tale), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Medieval Arabic tale),  
  *The King of the Mosquitoes* (Bruneian tale)  
  The parallel sets of contrasting narratives in this type of tales shows how good actions are rewarded and evil actions are punished. The first sequence of events gives a didactic moral point by showing a character’s good motives and their consequences. The second sequence of events, which is formally identical to the first, contrasts the narrative content of the previous event sequence to place an emphasis on the punishment which arises from bad motives of another character. Possibly, this Reward/Punishment pattern seems to be the most common narrative structure of folktales around the world, leading many people to think that folktales are all about “good guys vs. bad guys” struggle. Nevertheless, as can be seen below, characteristic features of narrative structures in folktales are not limited to only this pattern.

- **Interdiction/Violation**
  
  Interdiction → Preservation/Violation → Equilibrium maintained/Disequilibrium  
  e.g. *The Great King Eats Chaff* (Myanmar tale),  
  *The King with Donkey’s Ears/The King and Drum* (Indian tale)  
  In this pattern, the violation of an interdiction or a contract between the two protagonists will lead to a movement from equilibrium to disequilibrium. The preservation of an
interdiction or a contract between the two protagonists, on the other hand, will lead to the continuation of equilibrium.

- Trickery

  Trickery $\rightarrow$ Submission/Counteraction $\rightarrow$ Complicity/Competition $\rightarrow$ Victory

  e.g. *Why the Snail’s Muscles Never Ache* (Myanmar tale)
  *The Boy Called Juan Pusong* (Philippines–Cebuano tale)
  *The Tortoise and the Hare* (Ancient Greek tale)

  In this pattern, one protagonist tries to deceive the other with trickery, and the other protagonist either submits or reacts to it. Submission to trickery leads to complicity while the reaction with another or counter trickery leads to competition between the two protagonists. The trickery is resolved with the victory of one of the protagonists, either the one who deceives or who is deceived.

  Similar narrative structures or storylines and familiar themes of love, courage, honesty, kindness, jealousy, greed, wit, competition, etc. can motivate learners of English as a Second/Foreign language (ESL/EFL learners) to listen to, read and contribute to a discussion with confidence. Such familiarity also allows ESL/EFL learners to use more cognitive space to pay attention to the language features. This allows them to focus on understanding how specific vocabulary and grammatical patterns of English can be used to construct and convey meanings or messages they are familiar with. Hence, like other forms of literary texts, folktales can be useful to facilitate learners’ understanding of the importance of choosing specific lexico-grammatical features to create a particular meaning or effect and achieve a particular communicative purpose.

  Besides focusing on the micro skills such as lexico-grammatical features, elsewhere (see Lwin, 2015, 2017) I have also illustrated how ESL/EFL teachers can build on learners’ familiarity with narrative structures of folktales to help them develop the macro skills such as the discourse organization skill or an understanding of generic structure/organization of different types of texts (e.g. a news report). Similarly, focusing on the theme or message of the tales, learners’ attention can also be drawn to the discussion of cultural elements (e.g. the family structure and kinship terms) represented through certain choices of language form in folktales of a particular culture. For more mature learners of English, folktales can be used as a pedagogical springboard to create opportunities for them to produce task-based talk and/or writing. Using folktales, teachers can create tasks for these learners to use language to analyse, evaluate and justify their different responses to wits, rivalry, fairness, trickery, reward, punishment, etc. found in a culture. Skills in using language to analyse, evaluate and justify one’s views are closely associated with understanding and mastering academic discourse in language learning.

  Aside from similarities, focusing on differences among folktales from two or more cultures can also be useful. Despite having similar narrative structures or storylines and familiar themes, folktales of different cultures typically contain culture-specific narrative contents. Often the elements taking up the narrative roles remain to be culture-specific. For example, folktales of different cultures may choose different types of animals as characters, different types of food, different tasks or tests for the protagonists, etc. Table 1 gives an overview of how culture-specific narrative contents can be extracted for learners’ attention through a contrastive analysis of folktales from different cultures.

  Focusing on such culture-specific different narrative contents, teachers can use folktales to raise learners’ (inter)-cultural awareness – i.e. understanding, respecting or preserving their own culture and worldviews, as well as critical understanding of different cultures and different symbols, metaphors, characters, etc. Folktales typically include symbols/metaphors unique to a particular culture (e.g. ‘snail’ as a symbol of slowness in
Myanmar folktales vs. ‘buffalo’ in folktales of the Philippines) and words/expressions such as characters’ titles/names which represent virtues valued in a particular culture (Lwin, 2018). By giving learners opportunities to engage with such linguistic and cultural elements in folktales, teachers could guide their learners to understand the cultural determination of narrative contents within possibly transcultural narrative structures/forms. In other words, folktales have the potential of helping learners develop what Luciana (2005) calls attitudes of curiosity and openness, which she regards as the prime catalyst for developing intercultural communicative competence.

Table 1. Culture-specific narrative contents in folktales of different cultures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similar Narrative Structures &amp; Underlying Messages</th>
<th>Different Narrative Content</th>
<th>Characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reward/ Punishment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Golden Crow (Myanmar)</td>
<td>Good-natured girl</td>
<td>widow, daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad-tempered girl</td>
<td>tray of paddy, tamarind tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Golden Crow</td>
<td>sunset, golden house</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>golden, silver, brass ladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>golden, silver, brass plate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>box of rubies, snake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunghu and Nolbu (Korean)</td>
<td>Good younger brother</td>
<td>wife, children, neighbours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evil older brother</td>
<td>snake, swallow, bamboo blinds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Injured Swallow</td>
<td>winter, spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>gourd, gourd seed, rice, gold, beautiful nymph, carpenters, timber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The King of the Mosquitoes (Brunei)</td>
<td>Aminah – Greedy and proud elder sister</td>
<td>mother, two sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rokiah – Kind and humble younger sister</td>
<td>nipah leaves for the house, roof, mosquitoes, mosquito net (lawangan)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>King Mosquito</td>
<td>rice, water, cooking pot, firewood</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>worms, blood, animal bones, skull, gold, diamonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>poisonous snakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdiction/ Violation</td>
<td>The Great King Eats Chaff (Myanmar)</td>
<td>paddy, chaff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The King</td>
<td>boat, river, fisherman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attendant</td>
<td>cemetery, grave-digger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Old woman</td>
<td>forest, tree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drum-makers</td>
<td>palace drum to announce the hour</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>paddy, chaff</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>boat, river, fisherman</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cemetery, grave-digger</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>forest, tree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>palace drum to announce the hour</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Ruler (Nawab Anwar)</td>
<td>donkey ears</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>The Court Barber (Balban Hajjaam)</td>
<td>deodor tree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>musical instrument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intercultural competence has been defined as realization of one’s own cultural locatedness (i.e. the ability to contextualize one’s own cultural practices, assumptions, beliefs, etc.) and the ability to successfully deal with other cultures (Baker, 2016; Byram, 2000; Chen & Starosta, 2000). By extension, intercultural communicative competence can be defined as a construct which involves not only the awareness of cultural diversity but also the ability to communicate and negotiate different worldviews and values using a lingua franca, such as English. In this regard, folktales around the world written in English can serve as a useful tool to engage learners to develop intercultural communicative competence. These folktales can be used to help learners develop the competence in expressing their own cultural values and worldview, as well as negotiating the differences among cultures respectfully, to ensure effective interactions among users of English with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Besides providing learners with knowledge of cultural diversity, a contrastive analysis of folktales from different cultures could encourage or motivate them to use English to compare, negotiate, appreciate and communicate the similarities as well as differences among cultures.

Mature learners should also be encouraged to make more critical or imaginative responses when comparing folktales from different cultures as a way to encourage them to produce talk or writing justifying their views and negotiating their standpoints. Using “The Great King Eats Chaff” (Myanmar folktale) and “The King with Donkey’s Ears” (Indian folktale) as examples, teachers could pose questions such as:

- What do you think chaff symbolises for the people and culture in which this tale was originated?
- Why do you think chaff was featured in this tale? Why was it not the skin of an apple?
- Why do you think the names Nawab Anwar and Babban Hajjaam were chosen? What do these names represent in that culture?

The aim of such questions is to promote learners’ critical thinking and help them develop discussion skills as well as recognise the close relationship between language and culture. The culture of a country emphasises what is prevalent in that country or what is collectively perceived as important by its people.

3. Conclusion

With more societies becoming increasingly cosmopolitan in the 21st century, the education systems in several countries have continued to reform themselves toward 21st century learning (Lee, Hung & Teh, 2014; Teo, 2015). Among the education goals for 21st century learning, one of the aspects emphasized for the 21st century competencies is for learners to develop global and cross-cultural awareness (see the Singapore Ministry of
Education framework of 21st century competencies and desired outcome, as an example). Specifically, 21st century learners need a broader worldview and the ability to communicate and work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, with different ideas and perspectives. In this context, it is imperative that teachers recognize the richness of folktales as linguistic and cultural products, and the opportunities that these folktales or oral literary texts can provide learners to explore language and cultures simultaneously. At the same time, leveraging on the availability of collections of folktales around the world published in English, teachers could tap on the wisdom about various cultures drawn from these collections and help learners develop a broader worldview and communication skills, so that they will possess awareness and appreciation of cultural diversities and, hopefully, be able to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds successfully in the 21st century.

References


