Utilizing Folktales as Culture-Specific Schemata to Promote English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Reading Fluency

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ABSTRACT

Selecting materials that can promote ESL/EFL reading fluency and can provide reading lessons that are dynamic, motivating and meaningful are problems that language teachers often face. As a result, teachers are pressed to resort to monotonous activities found on teaching resources which oftentimes make the students discouraged to actively participate. One under-utilized teaching concept in the field of foreign language teaching is the use of folktales in reading class. Folktales contain and convey thematic elements that are profound for all humanity (Kuroda, 2013). The thematic nature of folktales which includes moral lessons, values, misconduct, admonition, deceit and similar things are significant for all, consequently making folktales suitable materials in promoting ESL/EFL reading fluency (Taylor, 2000). This paper will present the rationale for utilizing folktales as culture-specific schemata to promote ESL/EFL reading fluency. The paper will also show how folktales drawn from the students' own culture are utilized in getting them familiar with extensive reading, thus resulting to fluency in reading other types of fictional materials.

Introduction

Folktales (also written as folk tales) are stories that had been initially formed and passed on by words of mouth before writing systems were developed. The most common types of folktales, among many other sub-types, are fables (stories with animals as the main characters), trickster tales (stories where the main character can be a person, an animal, or other type of character that uses tricks or deceits to get what they desire), fairytales

(stories with some magical elements), and myths (stories about humans and the natural world), (Taylor, 2000).

Folktales from different cultures share more or less the same fundamental event sequence (Propp, 1968, 1975). For this reason, the story elements of folktales which illustrate the main events that make up the storyline, characters, time and setting have the likelihood of thorough transference from one language to another (Toolan, 2001), even though the discourse features of folktales, that is the words and the grammatical patterns, used by a particular storyteller vary (Chatman, 1978).

Another example that makes folktales suitable as culture-specific schemata to promote ESL/EFL reading fluency is their reward-punishment characteristic (Lwin, 2009). In this category of folktale, there are usually two characters that present moral qualities and values. One of the two will demonstrate how tasks or tests will be responded with humility, honesty and perseverance; whereas the other character will show how ill-manners and evil doings will result to failures in completing the same trials and tasks that the morally cognizant character positively achieves. This type of storyline in folktales demonstrate a contrastive narrative structure of task-success-reward for the morally cognizant character, and of task-failure-punishment for the character that does not value the importance of good manners and right conduct. Thus, the endeavors and tests of characters defined in narratives may vary but the familiar sequence of events in folktales across cultures still make the message of what is morally correct, and the consequences of wicked actions easily understood.

The thematic element that folktales often convey are universally accepted human truth that many concede to (Kuroda, 2013). Likewise, the characteristic of universality or similarity of the fundamental event sequence in folktales of different cultures makes this kind of literature easily reached mediums for language instruction and learning (Bean, 1999). With these fundamental characteristics, folktales can convey a cross-cultural language that may be structurally varied but literarily familiar and mutual.

The language of folktales rarely contains English phrases and expressions that are used in academic materials, like in the articles and journals. Thus, the

discourse features of folktales, that is the vocabulary and language structures use to write the narratives, are less complex than those utilize in academic papers. Folktales use short sentences, simple grammar and vocabulary often used in everyday communication. In addition to this, since the folktales' content and structures significantly affect the learners' schema as a result of its archetypal composition, a sort of common ground is established in this shared understanding that consequently lead to a reduced stage fright aspect of language learning (Krashen, 1987). The folktales' familiar themes of honesty, kindness, jealousy or other moral issues combined with a familiar narrative structure can motivate ESL/EFL learners to listen or to read with confidence and further willingness to allow more cognitive space to pay attention to the language that are being used in the story (Taylor, 2000). This facilitates easier processing and better comprehension of meanings and definitions of particular English vocabulary and grammatical patterns as learners realize denotations through contents and structures that are familiar to them. Therefore, the readings of folktales of both local and foreign origins written in English will be easily understood by the language learners than narratives that have no recognizable content (Gunderson, 2009).

This paper will provide practical guidelines for an alternative technique using folktales to promote extensive reading, to increase its value for ESL/EFL students and to serve as a tool at any level of English language learning. These activities will include poster production of a local and of a foreign origin folktale, creation of a story map, and storytelling in front of the class. This alternative approach for extensive reading aims to create lively class interactions, to enhance students' reading comprehension by motivating them through reading for enjoyment and to provide a framework where students are able to study the implications and the inherent relationship of culture and language.

Using Folktales in Language Classes

A good reader visualizes what he or she is reading. Effective reading involves strong imagination of the scenarios presented in the text. When

readers connect what they read to a context they are familiar with, the result is deeper and more meaningful comprehension. In turn, the readers are able to relate more with the ideas or messages being conveyed in the narratives that are either new ones, or previously collected but may have stagnated for a while. Therefore, utilizing materials drawn from the students' own culture is suitable to call upon their existing schemata because these materials contain elements that the students are familiar with. One type of narratives useful for bringing the tasks within the learners' experience (Nation, 2007) are the folktales.

The following activities involve the utilization of both local folktales and of foreign origins. They can be easily adapted to suit the needs at any level in ESL/EFL learning.

1. Character Identification Activity.

The activities commence by putting the students in pairs or in groups of three. Each pair or group will receive an A3-size paper where pictures of characters from chosen Japanese folktales are printed. The students are then instructed to put the material face down on their table/desk. Their task is to categorize the pictures according to the Japanese folktale where the characters are found. Each pair or group will be given different colors of marker pens which will be used to mark the characters as they are grouped together according to the narratives where they are the characters. When the students have grouped the characters, they then identify the title of the story both in Japanese and in English. Students are allowed to use the web connection they have in their smartphones to search the correct title of the Japanese folktales in English. This activity can be made entertaining by setting a time limit as the students complete the tasks. Rewards always put in additional fun to the learning and teaching process. Illustrations are useful to supplement what is semantically lacking (Kuroda, 2013). Further, visuals help bridge the gap between language and culture, which in turn makes the learners feel more at ease during the learning process. The shifting of focus from language to culture encourages the students to be more confident in an

English language class (Kuroda, 2013).

2. Name that Story (adapted from "Name that Tune")

After the Character Identification Activity, two pairs of students are put into a group. The pairs in the group are given a worksheet (see Appendix A). The pairs in the group are tasked to recall at least five (5) Japanese folktales that they had read during their primary school years. They write both the Japanese and the English title of the folktales in the first column found in the worksheet. The second column is where the students will write the names of the characters in each folktale they have reported. English words and expressions that are suitable to describe the stories are then recorded on the third column. When they have gathered enough data to complete the questions in the worksheet, the pairs then play "Name that Story." The rule is for each pair in the group to use the words and expressions they have written on the third column to give hints to identify the Japanese folktales there are referring to. They may use the names of the characters listed on the second column as supplements. During this activity, great discussions about what makes the story interesting, or what do the stories remind them of, or why the stories are memorable to them, are already observable. Further, in this activity, two strategies have been successfully employed. First, the recalling of literary pieces that the students had read during their younger years which usually comes along with a host of pleasant associations. And second, the utilization of simple expressions, short phrases and simple sentences in English that the students must have had learned during their middle school years. These kinds of interactions that happen while doing the tasks lowers the affective filter that ESL/EFL students usually have when they first join an English class (Kuroda, 2013), consequently leading to a new appreciation of English language.

3. The Graphic Organizer

In the following activity, the students once again work with their partners

to choose one Japanese folktale that they both like the most. In this pair work, the increasing motivation becomes more obvious, and the apprehension the students initially feel towards written English decreases. These reactions become apparent while they share the fond experiences and pleasant memories that the folktales they are choosing bring about. Students use a pre-designed graphic organizer in this activity (see Appendix B). A pre- and a post-teaching strategy, a graphic organizer is a visual organizer utilized for the purpose of introducing and reinforcing the key and pertinent concepts in a text (Chang, 2006). The pre-designed graphic organizer asks the students to show how the story develops by filling in the information about the title of the folktale, the characters, the setting, the conflict in the story, the summary of the plot/events, and the resolution, all the while using only English. A graphic organizer is included in this flow of activities because it underscores the ease of creating a story map poster that the students will create and use later when they retell the story in English.

4. The Story Map and The Story Telling

A story map is a strategy that uses a graphic organizer to help students learn the elements of a story (Jennings et al, 2014). It can be organized in a variety of ways, but typically it includes story characters, setting, problem, and solution (Jennings et al, 2014). The graphic organizer the students in pairs completed beforehand serves as an initial preparation as they create a story map poster. The poster includes only descriptive drawings, key dialogues, expressions and phrases from the story. The poster is one of the tools the students will use during the story telling activity. Students may opt to add some props and additional arts to make their story telling livelier and more enjoyable.

Conclusion

Most ESL/EFL teaching and learning resources contain dialogs to illustrate how particular sets of expressions or language patterns are used

in a particular situation. Story lines represent some real-life dialogs already familiar to the students (Breckenridge, 2006). Folktales contain story lines that are capable of activating students' schemata which in turn engage the students' imaginations and language skills and motivate them to participate with lowered affective filter. Further, folktales drawn from the students' own culture have the potential to be intimately familiar to the learners. Such characteristic is useful in encouraging the students to actively participate during the learning process as their schema reminds them of the familiarity to the story. Furthermore, the very structure of folktales, its discourse features, makes them practical teaching resources. The vocabulary and expressions folktales use have the potential to be easily understood because they are not specialized terminologies, but rather English words and language patterns that even in everyday conversations are commonly heard. The most rewarding in the utilization of folktales as culture-specific schema to encourage ESL/EFL reading fluency is the confidence to read English in reasonably increased number of words. Finally, through the activities described and applied the students are walked through the process that they will use in the subsequent classes using other folktales of foreign origins written in English.

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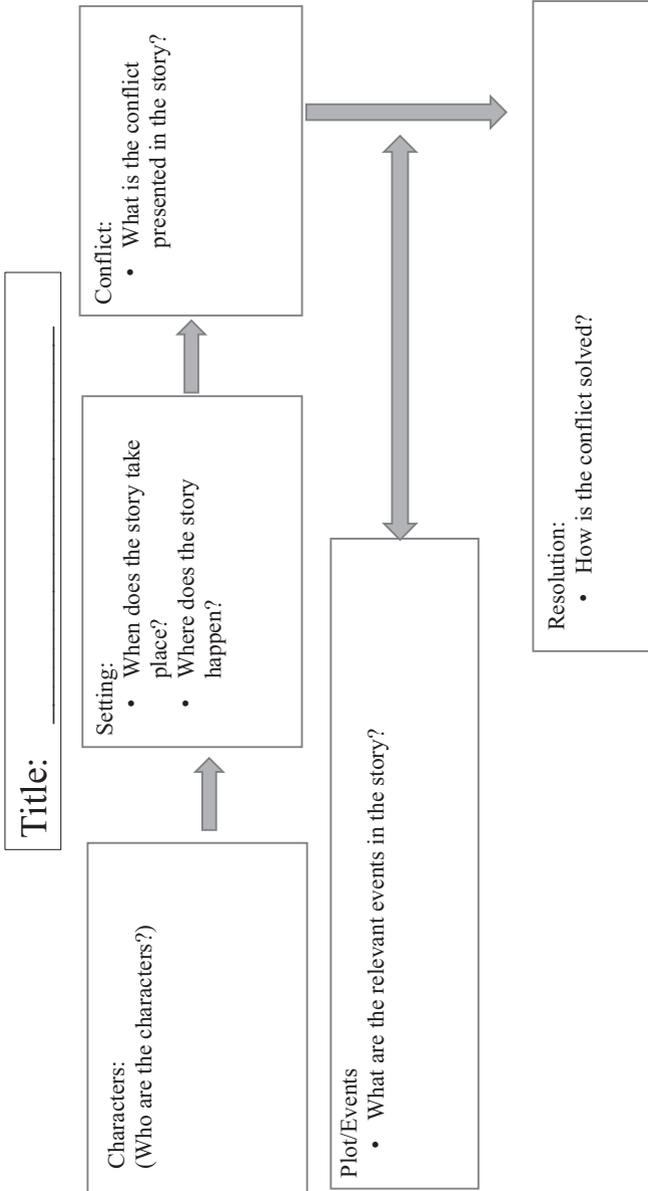Jennings, J., Caldwell, J., & Lerner, J. (2014). *Reading problems assessment and*

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Appendix A

1. Work in pairs.
2. Think of as many Japanese Folktales as you can remember.
3. Use your smartphones to search for the English title(s) of the Japanese folktales you've recalled.
4. Write the title in the first column.
5. Who are the characters in the stories? Write their names on the second column.
6. Think of as many words in English that you may use to describe the story.

Title	Characters	Vocabulary
Japanese Title		
English Title		
Japanese Title		
English Title		
Japanese Title		
English Title		
Japanese Title		
English Title		
Japanese Title		
English Title		

Instructions: Fill in the boxes to show how the story developed.

Title: _____

Characters:
(Who are the characters?)

Setting:
- When does the story take place?
- Where does the story happen?

Conflict:
- What is the conflict presented in the story?

Plot/Events
- What are the relevant events in the story?

Resolution:
- How is the conflict solved?

Appendix B