

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE USING POPULAR FOLK TALES IN BANGLADESH

AHMED SAYEEF

Abstract

Language teaching through literature has already been an accepted approach. And in the world of literature, folk literature is a type which is popular among the people across the globe. The reason behind the popularity is that it is easy to understand a folktale of its simple style, language and theme. However, literature itself naturally has the capacity to draw attention of the readers and audience. And in the case of folk literature or folk tale this is truer. In the attempt of teaching English language through literature, learners are automatically drawn into the stream of learning almost involuntarily. Linguists like Collie, Slater and Maley have the usability of literature in language teaching. And we also understand that the affective filter does not bar the learners in their language learning process when an interesting piece of literary work is utilized in language teaching. In the language learning classroom, popular folk tales could be a very effective teaching material. Folk tales contain simple language and generally has a universal theme and it offers an amusing and deductive lesson to the readers and audience. Therefore using folktales is a wonderful method of language teaching. It is possible to teach all the four skills of LSRW through the use of folktales.

Key words: English, Language, Literature, Teaching, Learning, Folktale, Bangla folktale

Contact author:

Ahmed Sayeef, Assistant Professor,
SUST, Sylhet, Bangladesh.

Email: ahmed-eng@sust.edu

1 Why Bangladesh?

In the context of Bangladesh, teaching English using popular folk tales is a practical venture. Bangladesh is a country that is abundant with folk tales. People love folk tales due to the fact that they are simple, easy going and more imaginative. And the total number of people who hail from the rural areas is greater than the educated city dwellers. We also know that a folk tale is something that is produced by the common folk of any country. And as we investigate into the age old tradition and culture of Bangladesh, it is evident that the huge treasure of folk literature is created and safeguarded by the people mainly of rural Bangladesh. The simple and easy going people of Bangladesh are more imaginative than many people of the world which is another cause of their love for folk tales. Hence, popular folk tales of Bangladesh in translation or any other folk tales that are available in English language could be utilized in teaching English for the mass people or people in general in the context of Bangladesh.

Bangla folktales present the simple image of Bengali rural life. Stories like 'Son-in-Law's Visit' and 'Fair Share' project with humor the lighter side of tensions in the family. We see the optimism of a poor Brahmin in the story of the 'Magic Pot of Rice' and the story of 'Who Will Die First' talks about the common people's extraordinary hope for a more just world. (Sajen)

Bangla folktales reveal the commonality of human experiences around the world. That's why we find the story of a two-ton wrestler, in a slight different form, in the folktales of Russia. Gypsies in the Czech Republic tell the same stories of Three Travelers and Mirror. The stories of Aesop and Panchatantra have much in common in their content. For ages, travellers from distant lands visited this region and Bangali travellers roamed around the world as well. A traveller who happened to hear a story during his journey probably would later relate it to his own people, embellishing it to his own little details to suit the change of place and context. Thus the Bangla folktales, which have become a part of the world literature, represent the richness of the Bengali mind. (Sajen)

2 What is a folk tale?

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, "a folktale is anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among a people. That means naturally and usually, a folk tale has no author, it has no certain time frame and again it is not confined to any particular place. A folktale is transmitted and circulated orally by people." ("Folktale")

In *Banglapedia*, the definition of folk tale goes as follows, "Folk tales are composed orally by illiterate people belonging to rural communities and passed on from one generation to the next by means of telling and retelling. Because of their oral nature, folk tales often tend to have different versions. This is to say that the birth of folk tale is oral and its birth is given by the people of rural area who are illiterate. Folktale lives through generations by the process of telling and retelling and because of its oral nature, the same folktale exists in different versions." ("Folk Tales")

Thus we can say, folktales are orally transmitted through generations. The author is unknown or anonymous. It is generally confined within a community, region or country. At a later stage, it is written and compiled by some other people and in other cases a folktale remains in its oral form. Folk tales are generally the type of tales that fall in the category of fables and fairy tales. They are universal in terms of their message, themes, and structures and hence have acceptance by people across the world. Usually folk tales carry some moral message or

deductive lesson. It is also commonly seen that folk tales have a simple structure and style and use common simple style, structure, words, phrases and expressions. They are intended for common people but welcomed by all classes of people. Folk literature includes all the myths, legends, epics, fables, and folktales passed down by word of mouth through the generations. The authors of traditional folk literature are usually unknown or unidentifiable.

As Taylor puts it, folktales are generally a part of folklore. Simply put, a folktale is a traditional story that has been passed on by word of mouth before writing systems were developed. They include fables (i.e., tales with animals as the main characters and an explicit moral lesson), fairy tales (i.e., tales with some magical elements), myths (i.e., tales which are considered sacred), among many other subtypes (qtd. in Lwin, "Using Folktales", p.75).

Again Maybin and Pearce said, like other forms of literature, folktales call for the audience to have a certain degree of suspension of disbelief about their fictitious characters and events. Folktales also have the characteristics of literary creativity. Defined at the level of language, literary creativity involves manipulation of sounds, words, phrases or overall linguistic form of the text (qtd. in Lwin, "Using Folktales", p.75).

Folktales typically include distinctive linguistic features such as novel words, onomatopoeic sounds, and repeated or paralleled phonological or grammatical patterns that create interesting rhythms (Lwin, "Using Folktales", p.75). Taylor notes that with the development of writing systems and other forms of technology, oral tales from various cultures have been transformed into written forms (e.g., the series in Folk Tales of the World brought out by Sterling Publishing). Some have become part of the canon of children's literature (e.g., Carpenter & Prichard, 1984). When folktales were written down and used as a way to introduce children to literature, words suitable for the child audience were often chosen (qtd. in Lwin, "Using Folktales", p. 75).

3 Why literature?

Why we are to use literature in language teaching? Using literature in language teaching can be worthy and rewarding because literature is something about life and one of the main objectives of literature is giving pleasure even though when it is about the real life and not merely a work of imagination. While people read a piece of literature they can easily get into it and are passively drawn into its stream. It has been found that when a teacher introduces a story or an anecdote in a language class, students are instantly attracted to it and start to react as they enjoy it. They become motivated and energized and language learning turns into fun. Learning any language means learning the four major skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Teaching a new language using literature of the target language and the literature of L1 in translation could be feasible and practical.

According to linguists Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater, we may choose literature for language teaching for the following reasons: valuable authentic material, since literature is not created with a view to teaching language and thereby we get the essence and examples of real life situation and setting. Particularly, when learners have survival level of proficiency and they need to learn more. They now can comprehend the language meant for the native speakers and become familiar with the different linguistic forms, functions and meanings. Culturally rich text: knowing a culture means knowing the relevant language. Literature is the true portrait of a culture and a nation. So, the literary text helps the learners of a language tremendously to learn the target language. Richness of language: the text of literature is rich with its lexical items, syntactic patterns and functions of discourse. It is also rich with other

literary devices like metaphor which inevitably enrich a reader. Personal involvement: a reader becomes personally involved when s/he starts reading a work of literature and begin to immerse themselves in the text. A person forgets the mechanical and artificial way of language learning and hence it is beneficial and conducive to language learning (Collie and Slater 3).

Again, we should also consider what linguist Alan Maley listed as reasons for using literature as a potential resource in the language classroom. The reasons are:

- a) Universality: literature deals with common issues of the universe such as love, separation, death, revenge, etc. So, they appeal to the people of all places and culture of the world.
- b) Non-triviality: Generally, language learning materials are trivialized but an author of literature does not trivialize or talk down in his/her work and we get an authentic and genuine text.
- c) Personal relevance: as people can relate the issues found in literature either to their own experiences or they can think about these things, there is a kind of personal relevance.
- d) Variety: a whole range of subject matter and language of different professions are found in literature which is conducive to language learning.
- e) Interest: the material of a piece of literature is interesting because they are primarily created to amuse or give pleasure to the readers.
- f) Economy and suggestive power: being economical and precise, the work of literature has a suggestive capacity. It may provoke a lot of debate and discussion for the language learners.
- g) Ambiguity: as literature is ambiguous, it produces huge diverse interpretations which enrich the language learning experience (Maley 12).

However, literature should be carefully chosen and designed according to the level of the learners. Popular folktales of the target language, in this case this is English and Bangla folktales in translation could be a major choice besides other popular folktales of other languages that are translated in English.

4 Why folk tales (folk literature)?

Folk tales are more popular, attractive and accessible to a wide range of people. They are universal in theme, in wisdom and appeal to people from all walks of life. So they have a universal appeal. Folk tales offer moral teaching, e.g., Aesop's Fables. They contain a lot of fun sometimes; here, we can consider the tale of the little bird, Tuntuni. 'Tuntuni' a Bangla folk tale that tells about a little bird, Tuntuni which took the gold coin of a king and eventually could avoid capital punishment due to its witty action whereas the king had to lose his nose. And in this connection, it may well be remembered what the world famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore said about learning process; he had said that no real learning can be done without enjoyment, and this is true in any learning situation and time, be it language or any other discipline. Folk tales can work to build the confidence of learners as it is easy to comprehend, students learn words, structures and usage rapidly and they have the feel that they are achieving something. Students also feel good by exchanging their views among themselves. And when folk tales of the target language are used, it helps to learn the culture of the target language as learners enjoy the folk literature of the target language. And by learning the culture of the target language learners simultaneously learn the language.

It is seen that the affective filter does not bar reaching information about the target language to reach the language learning area of the brain while any piece of literature is used in

language teaching and particularly when folk literature is utilized the obstruction will be felt less. The affective variables, such as motivation, fear, nervousness, anxiety and self-confidence do not obstruct the flow of information to the language learning area of the brain. To clarify, when motivation or self confidence is low due to anxiety, fear or boredom, the affective filter bars the information from reaching the language learning area of brain (Krashen 30). As we use folk tales in language teaching, learners become interested and motivated, and their self-confidence rises as they comprehend the input and learn some moral message.

The eminent linguist Taylor has expressed, “Indeed, oral tales do appeal to children due to their relatively simple forms of language and a storyline with proper beginning, middle and end. However, despite the outwardly simple appearance, folktales address themes and issues that are profound for all humanity. They convey psychologically significant themes of 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, making them suitable for language learners of all age groups.” (qtd. in Lwin, “Using Folktales”, p.75)

As Sajen talked about folk tale or story in his write up, he said, “Everyone loves stories, be it children or adults. It is this love which has kept alive, for generations, folktales that have been handed down by oral traditions. Though this cultural phenomenon has partly been lost in oblivion under the pressure of modernity, it can be a venerable source of our national culture. This is because the tales share the everyday ‘efforts made by our people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which we have created ourselves and keep ourselves in existence’ [Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Classics 2001, pp. 188].” (Sajen)

5 Methodological implications of this study

There are certain merits of using folktales in English language teaching. The first sensible benefit that learners get when a Bengali folktale in English version is utilized in classroom is that learners feel connected to the story as the story was originated in a learner’s own region or country and the story reflects a familiar culture and lifestyle. It also may be the case that the some learners know the story beforehand and are now going through the English version.

Second, the learners feel empathetic and sympathetic towards the characters of folktales, because there are usually some loveable characters found in a folktale, for instance, the character of Dalim Kumar in the tale of ‘Dalim Kumar’ who saved her mother from a witch.

Third, the simple storyline and moral teaching attract the learners and make them feel encouraged to know the story in full. For example, the tale of ‘Clever Fox and Crocodile’ offers a lesson on cheating as a bad act and the good practices of fair share.

Fourth, a mythical character like ‘Rakhushi Rani’ (demonic queen) who played dual roles and eventually ate up her own son too besides her stepson and cultural elements of a foreign folktale, e.g., the ‘palace’ where Cinderella was kept in captivity, fascinates the learners and thereby enhances the learning.

Now, as the language of a folktale is considered, it is seen, its language is learner friendly. Because, Bangla folktale like folktales of other countries contain:

- a) Simple sentence structures (syntactic structure), e.g., simple past or present tense.

- b) It uses simple sentence type, sometimes combined but rarely any complex sentence type.
- c) Simple and repeated expressions are used frequently, for instance, 'The little boy is going and going, far and far away to find the rare Lotus', and 'Once upon a time there was a good king,' etc.
- d) Onomatopoeic words and expressions like 'buzz' or 'boom' is used in folktales that help learners learn quickly the words from their association with the sounds.
- e) Simple sentence connectors like 'and', 'but' or 'so' etc. are used to express connection, transition and logical sequencing of thoughts.

Finally, one significant good outcome of learning English using Bangla folktales, by and large folktales in general, is that the learners may acquire subconsciously some good values such as love, humility, patience, friendliness and learn to judge what is good or bad and what one should do or not do.

6 How to use folk tale in language class

As Chatman puts it, generally, this has been seen that the folk tales of different cultures and places have almost the same content (plot, characters and storyline) which is called the 'what'; in different cultures and nations we have the 'how' or the way of presentation of the discourse, that is the actual language that is used, e.g. words, syntactic patterns etc. (qtd. in Lwin, "Using Folktales", p.76). For instance, there are variations of the famous tale of Cinderella found in different languages or countries such as the French, European, native American and Japanese versions of Cinderella. In our country though we do not have any version of Cinderella but we have a very similar plot in South Asia that is the tale of the beautiful princess with exceptionally long hair and who was in the captivity of an ugly dangerous witch. The princess was ultimately freed by a handsome prince. And, again all the folk tales have the similar structure that goes like the character-action-punishment/reward cycle process (Lwin, "Revisiting", p. 4). And, there are good and bad/evil characters that are in conflict or in the roles of the protagonist and antagonist. We see this is true in our Bangladeshi folk tales as well. According to Bean, the characteristic of universality or similarity of the fundamental event sequence in folktales from various cultures makes these tales "one of the most accessible vehicles for language learning" (Bean 58).

Now when a target language is to be learnt through folk tales—in this case, English—the words, phrases, expressions, grammar and grammatical patterns that are used in a folk tale are to be considered and utilized. It is found that in the case of a folk tale of any language, the words, phrases, expressions, grammar and grammatical patterns that are used, are suitable for a foreign language learner. In English language classes, tales from any culture translated into English can be useful for beginners to learn simple grammatical features, such as simple past and present tenses, coordinating connectors like "and" and "but". Being the closest to the oral tradition, the language of folktales will be less complex than the language of academic writing. For example, folktales rarely include phrases like "notwithstanding the fact that" (Taylor 13). Another important aspect that a folktale offers is introducing the culture of a given place, region or country from where the folktale originated. So, when a folktale of the target language, and in this case the language is English, is utilized, it helps learning the language properly by understanding and knowing the culture. As Taylor said, when folktales of the target language are used, the cultural elements of folktales also help to bridge common ground between cultures and at the same time bring out differences between them (qtd. in Lwin, "Using Folktales", p. 82).

For using Bangla folktales in an English learning classroom, we have good number of tales in their English version available, to name a few, 'Neelkamal and Lalkamal', 'Kanchanmala and Kankanmala', 'Monimala' and 'Dalim kumar' are some popular Bangla folk tales that are available.

A piece of folk tale can be used as a sample material for the English language teaching class room. For instance, the Bengali folktale 'Happy Man without Any Cloth' translated into English can be used in an ELT class. For listening skills: the story when the instructor reads it aloud, it can be used as a listening text for the learners. Again, with advanced level students, the story could be recorded with a standard pronunciation and accent and the students could listen and practice listening to Standard English. For speaking: the simple repeated expressions and simplified grammar structures are conducive to the development of speaking skills of the learners. Use of simple words and onomatopoeic expressions is another incentive for the learners of English found in folk tales. As students answer queries about the tale in target language, they practice speaking. Again, when students are asked to give their feedback or opinion about the tale in the target language, they practice speaking. If role play can be introduced in the class or students are asked to exchange their views among themselves in the target language, they will be encouraged in using the target language and in this way students can be involved in speaking.

For reading: when learners go through a folk tale in printed form, they get practice in reading. Students become involuntarily motivated and interested to know what the tale has to tell them. And if half of a folktale is given or told to the students, they might be encouraged to find out and guess the further narrative of the story, and thereby the learners will have the reading drill. In addition, the simple style, theme, syntactic structure and diction encourage the learners to read the tale and have their reading practice.

For writing: in practice of writing, students can utilize the simple words and syntactic structures that they learn from the folk tale and asked to give their feedback about a specific tale in writing or if they are asked to write about some character, information, moral message or teaching that they have learned from the story of the folktale. Thus learners feel motivated and they can participate in writing skills in a voluntary manner.

In addition to general writing skills, creative writing could be introduced wherein learners will develop their creative writing skills. When the learners are asked to imagine or improvise a similar plot of a given tale or they are told to create or imagine some characters for a certain plot and then to construct some dialogues for the created characters of their tale, learners will be engaged in practising creative writing. By practicing creative writing while learning English using folktales, learners will draw on their powers of imagination, expand their horizons of thinking and thereby achieve the skills of creative writing.

In fact, teaching/learning English language using folk tales could be an effective new method in the context of Bangladesh. The practice of teaching/learning English using folk literature as such is an established approach worldwide. In Bangladesh, however, teaching English using literature had been practiced for quite a long time in the school and college levels until the communicative language learning approach was introduced. That is to say, now in Bangladesh, a kind of situational syllabus is in practice. And, therefore, this relatively new trend of teaching English using folktales is yet to be introduced.

Other than the four major skills of the target language, two more skills that are nowadays being considered, pronunciation and memorization skills could be achieved through the use of folktales. Pronunciation can be practised within the speaking module. Students are to be asked to pronounce some selected words of the story in chorus by which they will be able to avoid hesitation and fear of mistake and then each student can be tested later individually. Again, the memorization skill practice could be done by asking the learners to remember the actions of a character/characters or remembering the storyline or sequence of incidents.

In my opinion, and from my observation, the context of this study should be Bangladesh where teaching English through literature has not been attempted at a substantial rate or if any, the process of teaching was faulty. The teaching objectives and goals were not clearly outlined and stated. Syllabus was lacking methodological instructions. Literature was used merely to give the students some moral messages and a kind of appreciation of literature was taught. Eventually, students used to memorize the answers to questions that might be set for the examinations. Consequently, though language learning was the target, the outcome was poor even after 10 to 12 years of studying English as a subject at school and college. At present in the name of communicative English, a type of syllabus has been introduced that is without any work of literature and which again has turned out to be futile.

References

- Bean, M. (1999) The role of traditional stories in language teaching and learning. In M. R MacDonald (ed.) *Traditional storytelling today: An international sourcebook* (pp. 548- 551). Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Collie, J. and Stephen S. (1990) *Literature in the language classroom: A resource book for ideas and activities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Folktale. (2019) In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/folktale> (Accessed on 7 January 2019).
- Folk Tales. (March 12, 2015) In *Banglapedia: the National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Folk_Tales (Accessed 31 December 2018).
- Krashen, S. D. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press Inc.
- Lwin S.M. (2015) Using folktales for language teaching. *The English Teacher* 54 (2), 74-83. <https://journals.melta.org.my/index.php/tet/article/download/89/23>. (Accessed 20 May 2019).
- Lwin, S. M. (2009) Revisiting a structural analysis of folktales: A means to an end? *The Buckingham Journal of Language and Linguistics* 2 (1), 69-80. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260563272> (Accessed 3rd November 2018).
- Maley and Duff, A. (1989) *The Inward Ear*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sajen, S. (2015) Bangla folktales: Stories of wisdom, wit and wonder. *The Daily Star*, Noboborsho Special 1422 Bangla. <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/naboborsho-special-1422/bangla-folktales-stories-wisdom-wit-and-wonder-77180> (Accessed 5th February 2019).
- Taylor, E. K. (2000) *Using folktales*. Cambridge University Press.