

Once upon a Time: Fairy Tales and Foreign Language Vocabulary Learning

Mohamed Rafik FADEL

Université Frères Mentouri – Constantine 1. Algérie

Résumé

La lecture de contes de fées pour le plaisir est une activité extraordinaire dans le contexte de l'enseignement des langues étrangères. Il y a plusieurs raisons pour lesquelles les enseignants devraient présenter des contes en classe. Les histoires sont introduites pour se réconcilier avec le monde, mais la plupart du temps elles sont utilisées pour se réconcilier avec la langue où de nouvelles structures ou surtout un nouveau vocabulaire sont présentés. Lors de la lecture pour le plaisir, les apprenants de langues étrangères sont fournis, à travers les histoires qu'ils lisent, par des occasions où ils sont en contact avec la langue étrangère dans un contexte. De même, ces histoires sont utilisées pour faire gagner aux apprenants une confiance en tant que lecteurs autonomes. Dans cet article, nous confirmons l'impact profond des contes de fées et les histoires pour les jeunes apprenants, utilisés comme matériel d'enseignement dans une activité de lecture pour le plaisir, sur l'apprentissage du vocabulaire d'une langue étrangère. Nous rendons également compte des résultats d'une étude menée pour mesurer le degré d'amélioration de la réussite des apprenants dans l'apprentissage du vocabulaire à travers la lecture pour le plaisir.

Mots clés : contes – lecture pour le plaisir – apprentissage d'une langue étrangère – apprentissage du vocabulaire – jeunes apprenants

Abstract

Reading fairy tales for pleasure is an extraordinary activity in the context of foreign language teaching. There are many reasons why teachers should present tales in the classroom. Stories are introduced to come to terms with the world, but most of the time they are used to come to terms with language where new structures or especially new vocabulary are being presented. When reading for pleasure, foreign language learners are provided through the stories they go through with opportunities to have contact with the foreign language in context. Equally, they are used to make the learners gain confidence as autonomous readers. In this paper, we confirm the deep impact that fairy tales and stories for young learners have, as a teaching material in a reading for pleasure activity, on learners' vocabulary learning in a foreign language. We, also, report on the results of an investigation carried out to measure the degree of improvement of learners' achievement in incidental vocabulary learning through reading for pleasure.

Key words: fairy tales – reading for pleasure – foreign language learning – vocabulary learning – young learners

1. Introduction

Reading a fairy tale, a fable, a myth, or a legend for pleasure is an activity which appeals to all ages. Great teachers like Plato, Confucius and others used such stories to connect with their learners. In the context of classroom language teaching, there are many reasons why we want to present stories. We tell stories to come to terms with the world, and to help come to terms with language as well. Through reading fairy tales for pleasure, foreign language learners are provided with opportunities to have contact with the language in context rather than in bits and pieces.

In this paper, we refer to the nature of fairy tales and their deep impact on learners as a teaching material in the field of foreign language acquisition. We report on the results of an investigation carried out to measure the degree of improvement of learners' achievement in incidental vocabulary learning through reading fairy tales for pleasure.

2. The Nature and Universality of Fairy Tales

The tale is an invitation for a trip in the imaginary world of the child in us. It is the root of all fiction, so of humanity. Some of the topics of tales go back to centuries before Christ. The tale can be defined as fiction. It is sometimes referred to as a story but what differentiates it from the story is that it deals with the supernatural world of magic, fairies, witches, elves. Under the superordinate tale, we can mention: fairy tales, marvellous tales, tales of nurses, fears, tales of animals, the myth, the legend, the fable...etc. When we refer to the different types of tale mentioned above, the best example which covers all of them is the one used by the Penguin Popular Classics edition who preferred to publish Brothers Grimm work under the heading of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*; a term that gathers all the magic, morality, wisdom and even fun in them. A tale generally starts with "once upon a time...", "There was once..." or "Once there was...", a formula which has become specific to the tale and which is found in no other literary form. The themes are various: morality, teaching the principles of good behaviour, honesty and many others. Most of the time, in a tale, the hero is not named; s/he is usually known only as "a young boy", "a little girl", "a princess", "a king", etc. In some tales, we may refer to her / him using a nickname, for example: "*Tom Thumb*", "*Cinderella*", "*Sinbad*", "Little Red Riding Hood", and "*Rose-bud*". The significance of that name is always found in the tale. It is in relationship with the height, the build, the colour of the skin of the hero, his clothes, his behaviour or other features specific to her/him. These characteristics are sometimes related to the fate of the hero / heroine and the development of the events. From

experience, it was noticed that children do not request that the hero or the heroine in a tale is named, but it would be better to do so to facilitate the identification with them.

The topics in tales are numerous. There are tales which report conflicts between the good and the bad, the kind and the naughty where a good fairy, a magician or an old lady would help the good to overcome the plots of the bad and the naughty. At other times, we find that the hero is fighting against the magic of a witch, the strength of an ogre or the cunning of some men whom s/he all defeats thanks to his intelligence, good luck or simply her/his honesty. In a fable or a tale of animals, the theme is usually the same as in a fairy tale. However, instead of characters, there are “figures”, or “personified animals”; in other words, animals showing human behaviour: they speak, think, wear clothes... The choice of animals in fables is not an arbitrary one; the referred in that animal to represent in fact a human characteristic which is supposed to be present in the animal for example a fox stands for a cunning person, a lion for a noble one.

A tale contains events that are goal-oriented. Each event is related to what happens in a society and aims at something precise, for example reporting history or teaching moralities. Those matters are also in immediate relationship to culture. For this reason and others, some stories are reorganized without alteration in the sense and meaning. Many of the stories told at school (and sometimes at home) are a world heritage. These stories bear universal values: the moralities found in them are received by children all over the world from their immediate environment. Such values as honesty, justice, mutual help, fidelity and others are not specific to a given culture; they are universal found in all culture and communities.

We notice that in different communities, we can find the same tales, with different character names, but with the same topic and even organisation even if we know that at the time these stories were worked out, these communities have not been in contact. For example, in “Little Red Riding Hood” the little girl with the red hood resembles the little girl “Ghriba” in “The ogre’s Oak” in the Algerian culture. Both girls go to visit a grand parent (grandmother / grandfather) and take with them some food; an important detail about the tight family relations. Both girls also are faced with a danger. In the European version, a wolf makes the girl follow another path to trap her and at last eats her. She is saved, with her grandmother, by a wood cutter who killed the wolf. In the Algerian version, “Ghriba” is trapped by an ogre in the same way the wolf trapped Little Red Riding Hood, and is saved by the countrymen who put fire at the cottage of the grand father and killed the ogre inside. The two stories belong to different cultures, but the situation, the setting, the characters and even the message of the morality do show something common to all human beings. The tight

relation between the tales makes us say that they belong to the same family: the universe of the tale. Otherwise, how can we explain that a character in Arab tales called Djeha has a “twin” in Europe called Nasreddine who plays the same tricks on people and in other communities where the same character with different names does the same thing? Ali-Benali (1993), in her preface to “*Perrault les Contes*”, stated that even in matters of organization and structure, different tales from different origins follow the same pattern. There is always a beginning where we encounter a danger, a misdeed or a departure, and an end where the danger is over and there is recovery or coming back. Thus, tales are not in relationship in matters of themes and topics only, but their universality goes beyond to reach the characters and even the organization and structure.

3. Fairy Tales and Foreign Language Learning

Reading fairy tales is both life experience and linguistic experience. The story mirrors the surrounding world and constructs a reality of its own, meeting the cognitive, psychological and emotional needs of the child (Malkina, 1995). It helps also develop the child’s language learning.

Most of the learners have grown up in a learning context full of narrative stories, whether real or fictitious. These narratives have as a basic aim entertainment. Then, we have what Deacon and Murphy (2001) called the deep impact of storytelling. They explain that stories can have effects on a person’s construction of knowledge and self. Storytelling is a material for teaching that can reach into the emotional and affective realms of learners. The child can have a mental participation or active perception that enables her / him to enter the story, identify with its characters and actively participate in all its events. Learners may be moved by a story and thus change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours after hearing or reading a story (Bettelheim, 1976). This deep impact makes language learning an enriching experience.

Stories are generally used as a comprehensible input in teaching a language (Krashen, 1985). Garvie (1990) presented the view that storytelling can be a major component in an acquisition-based teaching approach. The best way to realize this is to introduce storytelling as a reading input especially the type of pleasure reading which is not well exploited if not inexistent in the Algerian schools. Pleasure reading is in a sense an extensive reading. It is completely voluntary. In doing pleasure reading, readers have the possibility of skipping whole sections they find either too difficult or less interesting. They even have the option of abandoning reading the book or story and selecting another after going through a few pages.

They skip words they do not understand, if they think they understand the main point, and they have the alternative of searching the meaning of any word if they want to. As the learners' reading ability develops, they acquire a large range of passive vocabulary, or recognition vocabulary, which varies according to the material read. The success of pleasure reading depends on a variety of aspects mainly comprehensibility - materials adapted to the learners' cognitive and linguistic level- interest and relevance, and quantity.

When selecting a reading text, a story or a tale some criteria have to be taken into account. The first variable to consider when choosing a narrative text for foreign language teaching is the age of the learners and their prior knowledge, so that the text would be congruent with these two aspects. The second variable to consider is the learners' proficiency at the English language. This proficiency includes letters and word recognition, processing of sentences, bottom up processing. In other words, we must take into consideration learners' proficiency from words recognition to guessing what follows. When considering the text itself, the question of authenticity and adaptation arises. First, the text should be kept as close to its original form as possible. This would be the best way to conserve its authenticity, its aesthetic, and its cultural message. Second, the structure of the text should suit the learners' knowledge about language and textual organisation. Vocabulary is another variable to consider when choosing a text. It is very necessary to include basic and repetitive vocabulary and include new words in contexts learners know. At the same time, old words must be introduced to help achieving reading comprehension because there is a vocabulary level threshold beyond which no reading strategies such as guessing and inference can be successful. The English as foreign language teacher must always be aware of which part of the vocabulary is new and so tries to adapt its introduction in the text or prepares the learners beforehand. Finally, the lay out of the text must not be a negligible aspect, especially for young learners. Letter size, spacing, illustrations...etc. are part of the bottom up processing of the text. The teacher should be able to type the text with the necessary adaptations using spacing and letter size appropriate for the learner. On the other hand, illustrations, which may accompany the narrative text, would certainly be beneficial to learners, putting them into a particular conceptual field and / or emotional state that would facilitate comprehension. The story should also include chain structures, rhyming words, repetitious action words, sound words. The teacher should include them in such a way that they do not harm the meaning, but to help the learners acquire better and not bore them. The use of action words is recommended since they allow children to respond both mentally and physically to the story.

Their involvement in the story through these words facilitates their comprehension and gives them the opportunity to identify with the characters.

4. Incidental Vocabulary Learning through Fairy Tales

The magic world of fairy tales has always attracted me since I was a child. Stories as “*Loundja bent Lghoul*” (Loundja the ogre's daughter), “*Djazia wa Soltan*” (Djazia and the king) and others have always enchanted children when told by grandmothers at home. When I was a teacher of English to young learners, I tried to make my learners discover that magical world, as well, through universal fairy tales and reading for pleasure. In an action research investigation, I examined the use of the fairy tale as a teaching material in a reading for pleasure activity rather than considering it as a mere extra material to relax the learners. This investigation – the degree of impact of fairy tales on vocabulary acquisition at the elementary level – was carried out to answer the question: whether the teaching of a foreign language through the use of fairy tales as material in a reading for pleasure activity helps young learners acquire new vocabulary items.

For this effect, four fairy tales: *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White* and *Aladdin* were used. These fairy tales have been adapted in matters of structure, avoiding embedded sentences and type of sentences / structures that can cause trouble to the learners / readers and probably make them stop reading because they do not understand or cannot follow. The reading passages are not too long (between 4 and 8 pages) in order to avoid boredom and fatigue among pupils. The texts were also selected according to the interest they would bring: reading about palaces, adventure and learning morality. These narratives are of universal value and truth and they are found written in many languages. They have been illustrated with some pictures describing some of the important passages and printed in the usual format of stories learners are acquainted with in libraries.

As a target population, we opted for using pre-existing learners. We chose Middle school learners of English as a foreign language. These pupils were all at 4AM level. A sample of 120 learners were selected for this study. They were scattered over three schools in Constantine. All these learners have studied English for 4 years. The schools chosen for the study are in three different areas that represent the standard of living of the majority of the population of Constantine.

In the context of this research, two questionnaires were administered: one for learners and one for teachers in order to investigate the area of vocabulary learning and teaching, and

the use of fairy tales as a context for teaching / learning English. The questionnaires were composed of closed questions to be answered by either “Yes” or “No” and open questions requiring full statements. The answers gave a clear view about the type of stories the learners liked to read either in English or in Arabic, and confirmed our choice. They also showed the teachers’ preferences for one technique or another when presenting unknown vocabulary items and the learners’ strategies in learning vocabulary and what they do once they confront an unknown vocabulary item whether in class or at home.

The four illustrated fairy tales written in English: *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Snowdrop* and *Aladdin* were, then, handed to the three teachers who were in charge of the classes involved in the experiment. They were asked to read the four stories and identify all the words they thought their pupils did not know or have never studied. We calculated the number of words selected by the three teachers and we opted only for the ones the three of them agreed were unfamiliar and unknown to their learners. Consequently, there was a total of 22 words.

| Little Red Riding Hood | Cinderella | Snow White | Aladdin |
|---|--------------------------------|---|----------------|
| gobble mill gruff hug axe (05) | scolded pumpkin (02) | broad ebony pricked thoughtfully sprinkled proud spruce dwarf pitied knit spin dwelling betrayed exceedingly coffin (15) | / |

Table 1: List of Unknown Words Selected by the Three Teachers per Story

| Nouns | Verbs | Adjectives | Adverbs |
|----------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| axe | betrayed | broad | exceedingly |
| coffin | gobble | gruff | thoughtfully |
| dwarf | knit | proud | |
| dwelling | pricked | spruce | (02) |
| ebony | pitied | | |
| hug | scolded | (04) | |
| mill | spin | | |
| pumpkin | sprinkled | | |
| (08) | (08) | | |

Table 2: List of Unknown Words Selected by the Three Teachers per Category

On the basis of these findings a test was designed. The type of test opted for is “the One group pre-test + post-test”. Thus, a pre-test and a post-test that were identical were held at a given interval. The first took place before the learners were exposed to the selected fairy tales and the second after they have read them. The words listed in table 1, were used in the test which was composed of seven sections covering different types of activities: definition completion, sentence completion, matching words and translating from English into Arabic. The type of activities chosen was according to the teachers’ and the learners’ views about the way they used to teach vocabulary for the former and the way they wanted to learn vocabulary for the latter. The different words were used in the seven activities at random. The instructions were made clear to make the learners concentrate on the words rather than on what they are asked to do. In every section, there were a number of words and the learners were asked to tick the right answer, to put the letter that corresponds to the right answer in the right place or to translate. The learners were asked to do nothing if they do not know the answer. It was explained that they were not in a testing session but in a learning / teaching one.

After the pre-test, the subjects performed the activity of reading for pleasure. They were handed out 4 stories (*Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Snow White and Aladdin*) to read one by one at intervals. The learners were asked to read them at home and appreciate them at their pace, as they would do for any text or story in their mother language, having as a primary aim entertaining themselves. It must be mentioned that the pupils were not obliged to

read them. The period selected for the activity is supposed to be the most appropriate for such type of reading: “reading for pleasure”. The stories were given to the learners by the end of the term; after they have taken their exams to be read also during the term holidays. The first story given to the learners was “*Little Red Riding Hood*”. Two other stories “*Cinderella*” and “*Snow White*” were handed the day before the holidays. Then, the fourth story “*Aladdin*” was given to be read during the week after the holidays. This choice of giving the stories at intervals and following this order was not an arbitrary one. There were two main reasons behind it. First, it is because the learners were not used to read in English and giving them four stories at a time would be too much for them so that it would either discourage them reading or they would read one or two not more. Second, the degree of difficulty of each story and its length made us start by the easiest and the shortest ones.

Once the learners, subject of the investigation, went through all the stories and after five weeks from the pre-test, they took the post-test. Scores obtained in the pre-test and the post-test were compared and analysed to determine whether the pupils have learned any words that their teachers supposed they did not know or not after being exposed to the different stories. The general results in terms of category of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) as included in the different types of activity – completing a definition, giving a synonym, filling blanks, matching (definitions, opposites, translations) and translating – are summed up in the following table and figure.

| Activities | Words | Right Answers in the Pre-test | | Right Answers in the Post-test | |
|--|--------------|-------------------------------|-------|--------------------------------|-------|
| | | N | % | N | % |
| I-Complete the following definitions. | Pumpkin | 58 | 48.33 | 67 | 55.83 |
| | Dwarf | 21 | 17.50 | 52 | 43.33 |
| | Dwelling | 07 | 05.83 | 30 | 25 |
| II-Complete the following definitions. | To Prick | 58 | 48.33 | 64 | 53.33 |
| | To Knit | 56 | 46.67 | 83 | 69.16 |
| | To Pity | 55 | 45.83 | 65 | 54.17 |
| III- Choose the right synonym. | Axe | 21 | 17.50 | 35 | 29.17 |
| | Mill | 56 | 46.67 | 75 | 62.50 |
| | Ebony | 36 | 30 | 57 | 47.50 |
| IV-Complete the following sentences. | Coffin | 24 | 20 | 41 | 34.17 |
| | Hug | 16 | 13.33 | 28 | 23.34 |
| | Sprinkled | 37 | 30.83 | 59 | 49.17 |
| V-Match the following words with their opposites. | Broad | 41 | 34.16 | 50 | 41.67 |
| | Gruff | 64 | 53.33 | 40 | 33.33 |
| | Proud | 31 | 25.83 | 35 | 29.17 |
| | Spruce | 38 | 31.67 | 35 | 29.17 |
| VI-Match the following words with their translation into Arabic. | To Scold | 53 | 44.17 | 52 | 43.33 |
| | To Spin | 82 | 68.33 | 68 | 56.67 |
| | Thoughtfully | 44 | 36.67 | 40 | 33.33 |
| VII-Translate the following words into Arabic. | Betrayed | / | / | / | / |
| | To Gobble | / | / | 25 | 20.83 |
| | Exceedingly | / | / | / | / |

Table 3: Number and Rate of Right Answers in the Pre-test and the Post-test

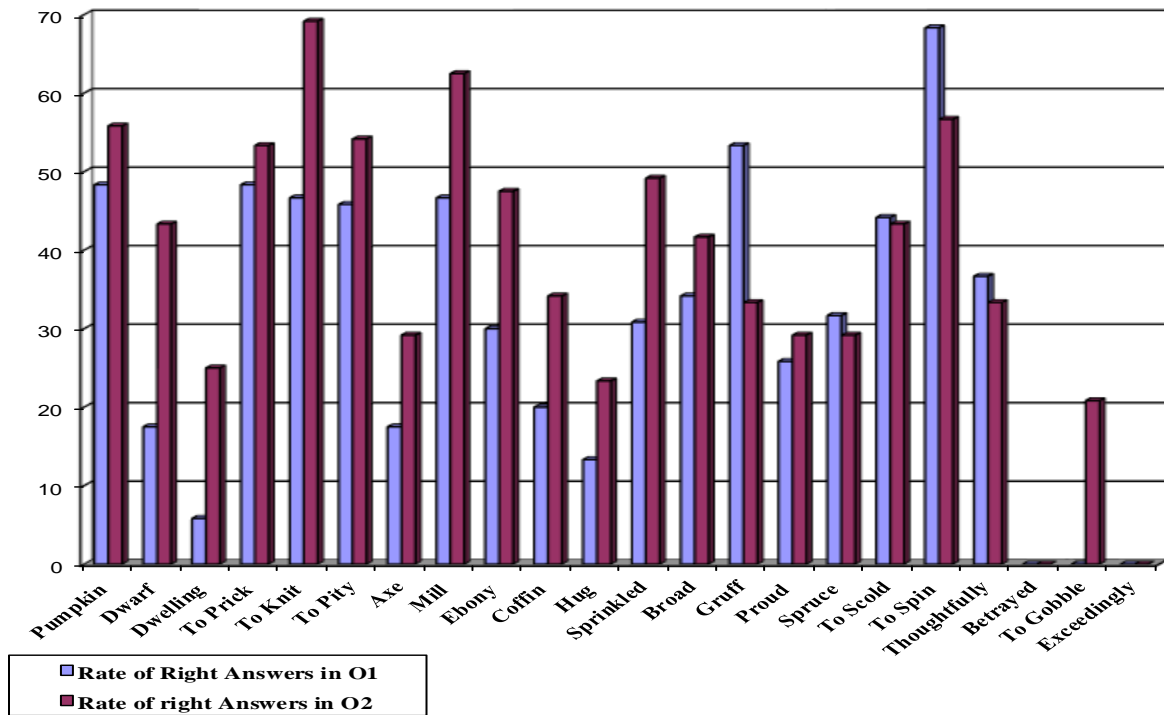


Figure 1: Rate of Right Answers in the Pre-test (O1) and the Post-test (O2)

From Table 3 and figure 1, we deduced the following conclusions:

- 1- The learners increased their scores in the post-test (after reading for pleasure of the stories) in 15 cases out of 22, with 10 cases of major increase (more than 10 %). This observation can lead us to say that the treatment proposed to the learners had its effect in the majority of cases since they could recognize the meaning of the majority of the words with higher percentages in the post-test than in the pre-test.
- 2- The learners developed a confidence in their ability to understand: except for 09 cases, all the learners gave an answer in the post-test.
- 3- The activities proposed to the learners were all at their level except activity VII (Translate the following words into Arabic) where we noted no answers for two cases something that would make us say that the learners are not used to such an activity or are weak at translating. We also noted that the less guided the instruction was in the activity, the smaller the number of answers.
- 4- Concerning the four stories proposed to the learners, we noticed that they were at the level of the learners with some degrees of difficulty. The most difficult story in terms of structure and vocabulary was “*Snow White*”. This story recorded 15 unknown words, according to the

three teachers, the highest number of unfamiliar words per story. The results of the pre-test confirmed this choice. However, they were ameliorated after the treatment and nearly all the 15 words were acquired by the learners with different degrees of attainment. The easiest ones were “*Little Red Riding Hood*” and “*Cinderella*”. This would justify our choice of the order of administration of the stories to the learners before the post-test.

5. Conclusion

Fairy tales engage our narrative minds in the service of language learning. The universality of the tale makes of it a material that can be used in any community and in any language, facilitating learning a foreign language when introduced in an adequate way. The emotional effects of the tale influence learners to respond deeply and to produce shifts in their beliefs and attitudes. This, then, leads them to a livelier participation and practice of the language, especially in matters of vocabulary learning. As the written aspect has taken over the oral one either in the classroom or at home, encouraging learners to develop reading for pleasure has become a necessity since it can be considered as a very efficient input, an aspect which has not been given much importance in the Algerian teaching materials and textbooks.

Bibliographical references

1. ALI-BENALI, Z. 1993. *Perrault: les contes* [Perrault: the Fairy Tales Preface]. Editions ENAG.
2. BETTELHEIM, B. 1976. *Psychanalyse des contes de fées* [Fairy Tales Psychoanalysis]. Paris : Robert Laffont, collection “Pluriel”
3. DEACON, B. and T. MYRPHY. 2001. Deep Impact Storytelling. *English Teaching Forum*, 39(4), pp 10-15/23
4. GAIES, S. 1977. The nature of linguistic input in formal second language learning: linguistic and communicative strategies. In H. Brown, C. Yorio and R. Crymes (Eds.), *On TESOL '77*. Washington D.C.: TESOL.
5. GARVIE, E. 1990. *Story as Vehicle: Teaching English to Young Children*. Clevedon: Multicultural Matters, Ltd.
6. KRASHEN, S.D. 1989. “We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading: Additional evidence for the input hypothesis”. *Modern Language Journal* 73, pp 440-64.
7. MALKINA, N. 1995. “Storytelling in Early Language Teaching”. *English Teaching Forum*, 33(1), pp 38-39.