



# The Journal of Asia TEFL

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## Teaching Issues

### Asian Folktales for Teaching English in Asia

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#### Introduction

Recently I have had the privilege to interview a group of English Language (EL) teachers from nine different South-East Asian (SEA) countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The teachers were studying or working at the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Language Centre (RELC), Singapore. They shared with me what they know about folktales of their own countries and other Asian countries, as well as why they (do not) believe in using Asian folktales to teach English in their respective countries. When asked about their knowledge of folktales, all of them said that they had read or heard about folktales from their own cultures in their own languages. This, of course, is not something unexpected, but what they shared with me about their knowledge of folktales from other Asian countries and their beliefs or reservations about using them in their EL classrooms point to a few issues which I would like to discuss here from the standpoint of someone who has been analysing folktales (see Lwin 2009, 2010) and recommending the use of folktales for teaching English as a Foreign or Second language (EFL/ESL) in Asia (see Lwin 2015, 2016). In what follows, I will present these issues in three broad categories – materials, learners and teachers – each followed by brief discussions of how it may be addressed.

#### Materials: “We teach students *Little Red Riding Hood*”

We often assumed that besides knowing about folktales of own culture (e.g., reading or listening to them told at home, school, community gatherings or institutions such as libraries) most of us have some experience with reading or learning folktales from other cultures. However, what I noted from my interviews with this group of EL teachers is that most of them were not familiar with or had not read or seen folktales from other Asian countries which have been translated and published in English. When asked to recall and share a few examples of folktales of a country other than their own, popular Western tales like “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Cinderella” and “Three Little Pigs” or Aesop fables came up often and more readily than a Thai folktale or Myanmar folktale, for example. I also noted that while the use of local folktales in local languages is not uncommon for character education to instil the desirable moral and cultural values of the society (especially in primary classrooms), the use of folktales in English (either local or from other Asian countries) to teach English is rare. For EL teaching, only popular Western tales

that form part of the canon of children's literature in English appear to be the most commonly used materials. The teachers gave reasons – such as scarcity of collections of folktales from different Asian countries published in English and possibility of inaccurate English language usage in the English translated versions of Asian folktales – for not thinking of using such Asian folktales to teach English.

I feel that this apparent dominance or easier access to Western tales is an issue which needs to be addressed if EL teaching in the SEA countries are to provide learners with an opportunity to learn about the various cultures of their region and learn the English language to develop what Kirkpatrick (2014) calls “the ASEAN intercultural competence”. Recognizing the major role played by English throughout Asia as a lingua franca to communicate mostly with fellow Asians rather than with speakers of English from “inner circle” countries such as UK and the USA, Kirkpatrick (2014) has called for the use of materials such as local literature in English in the ASEAN ELT curriculum. Indeed, Asia as a whole, and SEA as a more specific region, is culturally diverse due to the unique historical and socio-political backgrounds of different countries, despite having some commonalities among the neighbouring ones. Given that folktales of a people represent their history, lives, experiences, beliefs and social norms, folktales of different Asian countries written in English can be useful pedagogical materials for EL teachers in the region to provide their learners with opportunities to learn English and to develop simultaneously an understanding of cultural diversity of Asian societies.

Although some efforts have been made by the ASEAN to preserve the rich folk literature from different SEA countries and to promote the understanding among their peoples by publishing volumes that include the most popular examples from its member countries in English (see *ASEAN folk literature: An anthology*, edited by Eugenio, 1995), such efforts still remain few and inconsistent. Correspondingly, the few published collections of Asian folktales in English still appear unnoticeable or inaccessible for EL teachers in the region. It seems that more effort is needed to make such collections copious enough and easily available for EL teachers. With regard to the possibility of inaccurate English language usage in the English translated versions of Asian folktales, as suggested by a teacher in the group, it would be helpful to have certain action communities or designated educational institutes looking into the translation, publication and promoting the use of Asian folktales for EL teaching in Asia. As suggested by another teacher, such publications could also include information about the level of English language used in each volume to help teachers decide the suitability to adapt the materials for their learners.

### **Learners: “I’m a little bit not sure about using folktales because I’m teaching university students.”**

When asked about their beliefs in the benefits of using folktales in their respective EL classrooms, the teachers who showed reservations cited the level of learners they were teaching as the reason: for example, “because I’m teaching university students”; “my students are about sixteen or seventeen years old, so I think it’s not suitable for them”; “because my learners read for tertiary level learning, so it’s not something they would need to read or they would need to prepare”; or “may not be very relevant for older learners”. In fact, I often receive similar comments/questions (e.g., “Do you think folktales are suitable for older learners?") when I present my studies of using folktales for language teaching at conferences. To me, these responses point to a common misperception that folktales are only for the child audience, which is an issue that can and needs to be addressed.

Folktales do appeal to children due to their relatively simple forms of language and a clear 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 touch on psychologically significant themes of competition/rivalry, wits, wisdom, fairness, resilience, honesty, kindness, generosity, jealousy, arrogance, greed, and so forth. These themes and issues raised in folktales can be significant for all ages and all humanity, making them suitable for language learners of all age groups, including more mature learners such as tertiary level students.

With younger learners the teacher can focus on more straightforward themes, such as how honesty and kindness bring reward to a character while jealousy and arrogance bring failure to another, and ask learners to compare similar folktales from two or more Asian cultures (e.g., a Myanmar folktale and a Korean folktale, both of which have a similar theme). After explaining how the folktales from two different cultures share a common narrative structure (e.g., a sequence of events with good actions by a character leading to the character being rewarded and another sequence of events with bad actions leading to punishment), the teacher can foreground the differences in terms of narrative contents and help learners understand such culture-specific narrative contents (e.g., a crow featured as a prominent character in Myanmar folktales vs. a swallow in Korean folktales; the tamarind tree in Myanmar folktales vs. nipah leaves in folktales of Brunei Darussalam). Through such activities, learners can learn the vocabulary and sentence structures to describe or talk about these differences in narrative content and how they reflect different life experiences of people from different Asian cultures. As for older learners, teachers should go beyond asking them to describe similarities and differences. The level of questioning can aim to promote learners' higher order thinking and inferential skills, such as "Why do you think the colour gold is used so commonly in Myanmar folktales (e.g., "Golden Crow", "gold ladder", "gold plate")? What does it symbolize?" and "Why is it not any other colour, such as purple?" Learners can be asked to do some research to gather facts, evidence and information from historical documents about a particular culture, for example, before they write the assignment or present their findings to class.

As a case in point, Rowe and Levine (2009) suggested an activity for an undergraduate level course in their chapter on the interconnections of language and culture, which is a project assignment asking students to interview someone whose native language is not English to tell a folktale from their native country. Students then have to analyse the theme or message of the tale and discuss what the tale tells about the culture it comes from – e.g. the religious beliefs, the games, the livelihood, the family structure, etc. – and how it influences the metaphors used in everyday language. The aim of such activities is to help students recognize that the culture of a country emphasizes what is salient in that country or what is collectively perceived as important by its people. Through activities that encourage more analytical work, folktales can be used with even tertiary level learners to make them understand the values, practices, beliefs and worldviews of other cultures in a broader sociocultural context and from the standpoint of the people in that culture. Through such activities, the teacher can also help learners to develop the ability to contextualize their critical understanding of different cultural norms, values and worldviews and to express them in English. Elsewhere (see Lwin 2015) I have also illustrated how a trickster tale (i.e. a tale in which characters try to deceive each other using trickery) can be useful materials in teaching more mature learners to motivate them to provide critical responses. For example, after reading a trickster tale, learners can be asked to respond to "How important is honesty in winning a competition?" and justify their views. Learners from different cultures tend to have different beliefs, experiences and attitudes towards trickery and wit, and thus are likely to respond differently to the rivalry and fairness of actions taken by characters. Using language to analyse, evaluate and justify is a skill closely associated with academic discourse, and it is often an important aspect of learning language, especially for secondary and tertiary students.

In fact, learners may need a certain level of proficiency to do the above suggested activities. Often, culture is regarded as a topic for which learners need a certain level of proficiency to be able to discuss, negotiate and express their ideas. The notion of raising learners' awareness of culture often sounds like requiring deeper understanding of linguistic terms and principles to compare, express and justify their ideas, making it suitable only for more advanced learners. During the interview, one of the teachers interestingly suggested using learners' first language (L1) to discuss their ideas. In my opinion, although the use of L1 could encourage learners to be more forthcoming during discussions, it also limits the opportunities for them to develop skills in negotiating different cultural beliefs and behaviours using the target language, i.e., English. Therefore, it may not be helpful to achieve the goals of the ASEAN ELT lingua franca curriculum (Kirkpatrick 2014), which aims to develop intercultural competence in learners so as to prepare them for successful communication using English as a lingua franca.

### **Teachers: “I don’t understand the symbol, the context; I don’t know how to explain this.”**

When asked to share with me a few examples of how they would use Asian folktales if they were to use them in their EL classrooms, the teachers gave examples which covered various areas – reading (e.g., reading comprehension and extensive reading), speaking (roleplaying the dialogues, retelling after reading or read and discuss), writing (plot structure in narrative writing), vocabulary (descriptive words and figurative language) and grammar (the use of past tense and sentence structures to compare and contrast). However, the teachers felt more confident to use local folktales in English, if they are available, than folktales of other Asian countries. A challenge they perceived in using folktales of other Asian countries is that they may not have the background knowledge of different Asia cultures. Looking at the sample folktales of Myanmar I shared with them, they made comments such as “I don’t understand the symbol, the context; I don’t know how to express this”, “I don’t understand all the things because it contains something about cultural aspect”, or “at the end of the story it’s got a twist, but I don’t get this twist because maybe in my culture we don’t expect the twist in such tales”. Also noted from the examples they shared is how they would use folktales for teaching specific skills individually, rather than to teach these skills in a more integrated manner, except for a few instances of integrating reading and vocabulary or reading and speaking (e.g., read and discuss). To me, these point to issues related to teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills in using Asian folktales in EL classrooms.

It seems that if we are to encourage the use of Asian folktales in EL lessons to provide learners opportunities to explore the English language and understand cultural diversities of Asia, some professional development training will be needed to help teachers enhance their knowledge of diverse Asian cultures as well as the pedagogical skills for using folktales as a springboard to teach more than one skill in a more integrated manner. In dealing with the issue of the background knowledge about different Asian cultures, one of the teachers suggested working together as a group or department in the school and helping each other while another suggested doing some research in advance or together with students about diverse Asian cultures. As for executing lessons using folktales, there have been a couple of publications – e.g., Taylor (2000) with some suggested activities for using folktales with communicative approaches that focus on teaching language for communicating meaning, and Lwin (2015) with some illustrations of how folktales (mostly Asian) can be used for teaching of vocabulary, grammar as well as the generic structure or organization of different types of narrative texts. Nonetheless, I must admit that such publications or resources on using folktales, especially Asian folktales, which EL teachers can draw on for their lesson planning and execution are still rare.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is not my intention to claim that the use of stories in EL classrooms in Asia is uncommon. Stories are commonly used for EL teaching, especially in the primary or elementary classrooms. As mentioned, the use local folktales in local language lessons or for character/value education is also not an uncommon practice. What I hope to highlight through this discussion is that it seems about time we consider including folktales from different Asian countries which have been published in English in our ELT curricula and to consider using them even with more mature or advanced learners. With more Asian cities becoming increasingly cosmopolitan and with increase in trade, communication, travel and migration among Asian countries, it has become increasingly important for citizens of these countries to be proficient speakers of English, which has been widely used as a lingua franca in Asia. At the same time, we should realize that it has become equally important for them to be knowledgeable and open to cultures of other Asian countries.

With the unique role of English language (EL) as a lingua franca in Asia, the goals of EL education in Asia should acknowledge the importance of developing knowledge and skills in using EL to communicate

successfully with fellow Asians and the intercultural competence which is particularly relevant for the Asian context (Kirkpatrick 2014). In the name of unity, the emphasis among Asian countries in general and SEA countries in particular, seems to have been on celebrating the commonalities. While this should still be encouraged, understanding the uniqueness and diversity among different Asian cultures should not be ignored. With the increase in communication among fellow Asians using English as a lingua franca, it has never been more important for EL teachers in the region to help their learners develop not only competence in language skills, but also the awareness, understanding and respect for diversities among speakers of English from other Asian countries so that they will develop into proficient users of English who are able to communicate and work with people of different Asian cultures.

In this context, folktales with their commonality in terms of the narrative structures (e.g., honest/kind actions → reward vs. selfish/unkind actions → failure), and yet diversity in terms of the narrative content (e.g., particular types of animals, games, things featured, kinds of symbols used) can serve as a useful pedagogical springboard to provide learners with opportunities to explore the English language and understand cultural similarities as well as differences simultaneously. Familiar themes and common narrative structural patterns can allow learners to give more attention to understanding the differences in narrative contents and expression elements, such as different symbols or metaphors, and discuss their opinions and views. In this way, a comparative analysis of Asian folktales (i.e., comparing the narrative structures and contents of folktales of various Asian cultures) can help to bridge common ground between cultures and at the same time bring out the differences between them.

While there has been a body of studies and discussion on using literature in ELT, those focusing on using folktales, in particular Asian folktales, are relatively rare. Compared to literary works, such as novels or short stories, folktales are shorter in length and often share common (if not universal) themes and narrative structures among those from different cultures. This makes them possible for teachers to use a folktale within one lesson period, for example, and to use more lesson time and learners' cognitive space to help them develop competence in analysing, negotiating and discussing viewpoints on culture-specific narrative content using the target language, English. If the use of local literature in English is recommended for helping learners develop the international competence, which is particularly relevant for learners of English in Asia (Kirkpatrick 2014), is there also a place for using literary texts from the oral tradition such as folktales? After all, Asia is well-known for its rich oral history and folk literature including folktales.

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