



TEACHING FAIRY TALES

Edited by
Nancy L. Canepa

Teaching Fairy Tales

Series in Fairy-Tale Studies

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TEACHING

FAIRY TALES



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"I CANNOT UNDERSTAND YOU"

FOLKTALES AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

Maria Kaliambou

FOLKTALES AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE UNDERSTANDING

In the folktale "I Cannot Understand You" (ATU 1700), a man traveling in a foreign country is impressed by all the new things he sees. He is curious to learn more about the people of the land and tries to communicate with them, though he cannot speak their language. Every time he asks them a question, he receives the same answer, "I cannot understand you." Ultimately, the traveler is led to believe that "I cannot understand you" is the name of an important local: someone with riches who got married and immediately thereafter died.

Other folktales also address, in a similar fun-loving manner, the problems inherent in linguistic and cultural communication. The jocular tale "Misunderstanding Because of Ignorance of a Foreign Language" (ATU 1699) refers vividly and humorously to the situations that occur between people speaking different languages. The folktale "Words in a Foreign Language Thought to Be Insults" (ATU 1322) speaks to cognitive misinterpretation caused by ignorance of foreign vocabulary.

How many times have we ended up in comical, frustrating, cross-cultural conflict just because we do not speak and understand one another's languages? The folktales just mentioned epitomize the centrality and necessity of foreign-language competence. When we learn a foreign

language, we strive to communicate our thoughts and feelings and also to understand what other people are trying to convey to us.

How can we learn foreign language more effectively? And which dynamic pedagogical materials offer an engaging means for instruction? Instructors use varied texts to teach their students linguistic and cultural competency. Experimenting with folktales at all language levels can be rewarding. In this essay I propose that folktales constitute rich, multilayered material for foreign-language pedagogy. Based on my teaching experience (see Kaliambou, *Routledge Modern Greek Reader*), I give concrete pedagogical suggestions regarding the learning and teaching of a foreign language (and its culture) through folktales, which can enhance all four linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) while sharpening students' sensitivity toward other cultures.

WHICH FOLKTALES TO CHOOSE FOR THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

Language textbooks from different times and places contain folktales as suitable material for language instruction. For example, French textbooks for elementary schools in eighteenth-century France include Charles Perrault's stories as reading material (see Velay-Vallantin); the teaching of French language outside France also draws on Perrault's stories (in areas such as Germany and Greece; see Ranke and Kaplanoglou, respectively). In this case, folktales transcend region and become an inclusively effective means of teaching language. Cultures outside Western Europe incorporate folktales for teaching language as well. Ulrich Marzolph describes a seventeenth-century Persian grammar book that includes oral narratives for teaching reading and translating, something that contributed to the book's success and popularity. Even today one can find folklore included in readers and spelling books for children; it is the perfect entryway to learning a first or foreign language. Current foreign-language pedagogy suggests that teaching a foreign language should encompass more than formal and structural principles and that the study of cultural context is indispensable for a student of foreign language (Kramsch, *Context*). Instructors in class should use authentic material embedded in the real context of the spoken language. Folktales, as part of the larger cultural picture, constitute useful material for foreign-language learning.

Which folktales should an instructor choose for the classroom? The answer is suited to the lesson at hand. Magic, religious, realistic, anecdotal, and formula tales all yield positive pedagogical results, each for different reasons. According to the level of the students and the learning outcomes the teacher wants to achieve,

different tales can serve different pedagogical needs. For instance, with respect to the language level of the class, animal tales are usually shorter tales with limited vocabulary, which makes them more accessible to elementary students. Magic, religious, and novella tales provide longer texts and thus are appropriate for higher levels of language competency. Formula tales, because they are based on repetitions, can help with vocabulary tasks. Jocular tales and anecdotes, usually shorter texts, are useful for studying the cultural dimensions of wittiness and trickery and can be paralleled with personal culture stories of the students.

Language instructors are not necessarily folklorists and consequently do not know that folktales have various subtypes. One suggestion for instructors is to consult a catalog of tale types for the target country, so that they can gather folktales from several subtypes. Instructors should choose folktales from various regions where the target language is spoken and should consider using stories in dialect form for more advanced students to get them acquainted with variety in the foreign language; dialect tales should also be considered for advanced classes in dialectology. In addition to folktales, many genres have useful material for language instruction, for example, myths, fables, legends, urban legends, and other fantasy stories. The structure and content of these genres are similar to those of folktales and thus facilitate language acquisition. In addition to autochthonous material, foreign-language teachers can use texts in translation from other countries to provide context for the source material in the target language. For instance, teachers can present the same folktale from different countries after teaching the target-language tale. This will generate various class discussions about intercultural similarities and differences.

The main concern and challenge for an instructor is the level of foreign-language competence required by a given folktale. Usually folktales can be taught after the second semester of instruction. Students need to have acquired basic knowledge of a foreign language, such as the new alphabet, so that they can read short texts and be familiar with basic grammatical structures—such as verb tenses and nouns and their inflection (if any)—to be able to read and learn from folktales. Obviously, the editorial hand of the teacher plays a defining role in sculpting the lesson. The instructor can modify the texts according to the needs of a particular class. Edited and simplified versions can be taught at the elementary level of a language class; advanced language classes will have more options available to the instructor. The role of teacher is catalytic not only to language pedagogy but also to the general knowledge provided about the source material. The folktale material delivered in class demonstrates the teacher’s perception of what a relevant folktale is; this will consequently influence the perception students have of folktales.

MULTIPLE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Folktales in a foreign-language classroom help students enhance all four core language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Depending on the desired learning outcome, teachers can use certain stories to focus on a particular language skill. Folktales offer excellent material for learning and practicing grammar and acquiring specific vocabulary. Furthermore, folktales provide a tool for better cultural understanding and can be an invaluable means of bridging cultural differences. In the following discussion I suggest some pedagogical activities and tasks that target practicing the four language skills. It is not possible to entirely separate the skills from one another because they are so interwoven, and thus most of the activities integrate more than one skill. I have also chosen to include some tasks that target the practicing of vocabulary and grammar and the sharpening of cultural awareness.

Reading

Reading (extensive and/or intensive) is an integral part of foreign-language instruction, and folktales offer a useful means of practice. Extensive “free” reading brings positive results regarding acquisition of new vocabulary and grammar. Instructors can schedule a few minutes every week in class for students to practice individual silent reading. According to Eric Taylor, folktales are particularly suitable for silent reading because they are short and students can finish them quickly. Also, because there are many types of folktales, they can encompass various degrees of difficulty and taste. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, folktales are interesting to students (Taylor, 134).

The most common method of intensive reading focuses on smaller linguistic units (such as sentences) and targets language accuracy (such as grammar and syntax) over the complete understanding of a text. Folktales can be used for teaching grammar and syntax and as a means of focusing on particular vocabulary.

The instructor can assess reading comprehension in several ways. Some activities for students are to answer in either oral or written form concrete questions related to the facts of the folktale, to determine whether statements related to the tale are true or false, or to answer multiple-choice questions. These questions can refer to concrete episodes, motifs, and plot points of the folktale or to more general theoretical issues raised by the folktale (e.g., envy, greed, love, marriage). Students should learn the structure of a text, including temporal and spatial sequences, the logical order of actions and their effects, and so on. This helps students develop their reading and analytical skills, because they have to summarize, analyze, and express their opinion on varied matters.

Writing

Students’ analytical thinking can be further enhanced while strengthening their writing skills. The instructor can create various exercises based on folktales to support the students’ written production. A common writing assignment is summarizing the story. More complex activities include theoretical, abstract, and interpretive questions, which require an advanced ability to write in the foreign language. These are the “why” and not the “what” questions. Some examples of activities are:

1. Write about whether or not you like the particular folktale. Give your reasons.
2. Write your opinion about the significance of an abstract notion (e.g., the role of fate, beauty, family, religion, etc.) in the folktale.
3. Finish the story with a different ending.
4. Search relevant literary motifs and compare them with the folktale studied in class (e.g., the “Beauty and the Beast” tale in antiquity, the personification of Death in ancient and medieval texts).

With these sets of assignments, students practice writing in the foreign language, perform research, make comparisons, present arguments, and explore their creativity.

Another excellent activity involves creative writing in the foreign language, where students are asked to write their own stories. Students become inspired by the stories they read in class and the stories they already know and love. Even the less creative students are usually motivated to let their fantasy spin. In the spring of 2011 I assembled the creative writing assignments of students at all levels of Modern Greek study (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) into a publication; among their writings are modern fairy tales (Appendix A).

Speaking

Folktales are helpful in promoting the skill of speaking. For example, they can be used to practice correct pronunciation. Furthermore, folktales raise issues that can initiate lively conversations in the classroom. Depending on language level, students can orally respond to factual questions related to the plot or expand on abstract or theoretical issues where they must develop and express an opinion. Other ways of generating discussion in the classroom—besides answering factual or theoretical questions—are presentations or mini-lectures by students either individually or in small groups. Students can conduct research on a specific topic raised by the folktale (e.g., the role of fairies or food and nutrition in the world of the folktale), give a

short presentation in class, and initiate further discussion with their classmates. The presenters should prepare vocabulary lists for their peers. With this presentation-style activity, students can touch on a variety of cultural, historical, religious, moral, political, and personal issues while honing their speaking and listening skill sets. Furthermore, students can be introspective as they discuss their own cultural experiences and compare them with those of a given folktale (see section on cultural awareness later in this essay).

Another way to engage students in speaking is to make them tell stories. For instance, they can “retell” the folktales studied in class by adding a different ending. They can narrate a story from their own culture or from their own personal experiences. Through retellings and personal tellings, the instructor can teach students how to become storytellers in a foreign language.

To further use the performative aspect of folktales, the teacher can assign theater skits or theatrical dialogues. Students can select different roles from the studied folktales and perform a small dialogue, a scene from the folktale, or the entire narrative. Usually students have fun with this activity and become more creative and improvisational in the foreign language. As mentioned, they can alter the ending of the folktale—or, if they are more ambitious, create their own version of the folktale. Perhaps this reinterpretation could even take the form of a full-fledged adaptation and performance of a tale. In the spring of 2012 several of my students were involved in a Yale undergraduate theatrical production of an English adaptation of a Greek Cinderella tale, written by a student of mine who saw in the small tale an opportunity for culturally immersive theater (Appendix B).

Listening

Listening practice is included in all the mentioned activities. However, if instructors want to focus only on listening comprehension, they can read folktales aloud to students or, alternatively, play recordings of performances of the folktales. It can be pedagogically effective when the teacher becomes a mini-storyteller and narrates the stories without reading them. Illustrations can facilitate this process for the teacher, distilling the sequence of the plot and outlining the order of episodes. Drawings and illustrations can help students, particularly beginners who understand but cannot yet produce speech in the foreign language.

Eric Taylor offers a variety of activities with drawings that test the listening comprehension of students without requiring them to speak. For instance, students can draw what they hear, place a series of drawings in chronological order according to the story, or mark the story’s events on a map (Taylor, 53–71). Forgoing visuals, the assessment of listening can occur as does the assessment of reading

comprehension: with questions ranging from minimal (yes/no, true/false, multiple choice, find the correct order of the sentences) to elaborate language production (opinion questions, analysis, prediction, etc.).

Vocabulary

Claire Kramersch argues that the words in folktales have a symbolic power, “bring[ing] about events in a ‘magical’ way,” and thus students learn to play with symbolic forms (Kramersch, *Multilingual Subject*, 38). Through folktales students can learn a broad spectrum of vocabulary of a foreign language. They can learn basic content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) and function words (articles, pronouns, conjunctions, participles, etc.). Words in folktales can be both specific (fireplace, cow, pit, golden coins, etc.) and of general and abstract nature (happiness, laziness, piety, etc.). An additional lexical asset to the standard vocabulary is the abundant colloquialisms and idiomatic phrases in folktales. Everyday expressions, in particular, are suited to the folktale context and offer authentic scenes of language use. For language learners at a more advanced level, words in archaic language or with multiple meanings are available as well. As Cora Lee Nollendorfs states regarding the use of similar expressions in German folktales, “Students may not need to *use* such expressions, but they should be able to *understand* them and recognize their source and style” (Nollendorfs, 293–94).

The best method for learning new vocabulary is discovering meaning from a word’s context. As Taylor states, “Because of the predictability, redundancy, and repetition in folktales, unknown words are usually easier to guess than in many other types of texts. This makes folktales good for developing skill at inferring meaning from context—a very useful general reading strategy” (Taylor, 142). If translations of words are provided, then the glossing of unknown words should be limited to content words and only some high-register function words. In my opinion the footnote system is the most efficient method for learning new vocabulary because students can immediately locate selected words, their translation, and any additional information provided by the teacher.

There is infinite potential for teachers to create class activities and home exercises that test vocabulary. Depending on the character of a class and the pedagogy of the teacher, folktales can be taught in either a communicative or more traditional manner. The communicative style intends to foster free and unimpeded communication between speakers of the language, whereas more traditional exercises emphasize accuracy and perfection of basic language skills. Several activities that can engage students to master new vocabulary are finding synonyms, providing antonyms, filling in the blanks with words from the text, making sentences with

some key words of the text, finding as many words as possible related to a topic, finishing half sentences, and solving crossword puzzles.

Grammar

Grammar, an inevitable part of every language class, can be taught in an entertaining manner through the use of folktales. A teacher can concentrate on specific grammatical phenomena (such as verb tenses, conditionals, nouns, comparatives—and degrees—of adjectives, diminutive forms, and indirect and direct speech), highlighting relevant passages to illustrate a point. Folktales are excellent material for practicing all forms of verbs. A standard activity for practicing verb tenses is to have students narrate a story in the present, past, and future tenses. Worth noting is a standard characteristic of folktales: the repetition of “three,” offering an excellent opportunity to teach the degrees of adjectives: good, better, best; bad, worse, worst; etc.

An alternative method for studying German grammar is offered, for example, by the textbook *GRIMMATIK: German Grammar Through the Magic of the Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales* by Margrit Zinggeller (2007), who uses folktales to teach complicated grammatical forms and structures. Another study for German-language instruction examines the teaching of relative pronouns through German fairy tales (Brown).

Culture

Teaching a foreign language should encompass more than formal and structural principles; equally important is the use of “context and culture in language teaching” (Kramsch, *Context*). Language evolves alongside cultural and social practice, because language occurs in (inter)cultural interactions. Study of cultural context is thus indispensable for the foreign-language student.

Folktales offer richly textured material for students to develop their cultural awareness and knowledge of a foreign culture. Folktales are situated in reality—as Lutz Röhrich states in his seminal book *Folktales and Reality* (1991)—and can thus teach us much about the cultural and social context in which they are embedded. Simultaneously, given the subject matter being studied, “students remain entertained and interested while learning sophisticated things” (Obergeffell, 446). Sandra Obergeffell, in her article about using French folktales in a French-language classroom, mentions that “we are not only foreign language and culture teachers; we are also humanists, interested in the development of the students as a whole person” (441). Folktales are a jumping-off point for the discussion of culturally bound morals, values, and norms and thus foster a greater understanding of different

perspectives. If the desired learning outcome is cultural awareness, students can, for instance, conduct extracurricular research on the region a given folktale comes from (alternatively, the teacher can bring additional information to class).

When I taught a version of the Greek “Cinderella” tale to an advanced Modern Greek class, its idiosyncratic expression of the culture and sociohistorical reality of the region initiated lots of discussion in class. For example, the story starts with a father who cannot stand his poverty, leaves his family, and goes abroad to find a better job so that he can send money to his relatives back home. This episode triggered many thoughts about unemployment and immigration, an old phenomenon in Greece and still relevant today. Religion and religious rituals were another topic of conversation. Cinderella, in contrast to the well-known Disney version, goes not to a royal dance but to church for midnight mass on Easter; it is there that she meets her prince. This cultural detail underlines the importance of religion in Greek rural society. Village life in rural environments—including traditional occupations such as farming and animal husbandry—exists in the context of the decay that has befallen many villages as Greece has metamorphosed into a conglomeration of cityscapes. The shift from these communities to modern societies offers vivid material for conversation. Through folktales, my students were given the opportunity to learn not only the glory of ancient Greece but also the reality of modern Greek socioeconomic life, which for some students was totally new and surprising (see Kaliambou, “I Stachtopouta,” 665–68).

Another way to engage conversations about multiple cultures in a language class is to assign stories from various regions. To follow up on the previous example of the Greek “Cinderella,” students can read versions of the cinder-girl folktale from different countries. Students can analyze, evaluate, and compare and contrast stories, thus using critical thinking while practicing their language skills (see Taylor, 255–72).

One step beyond the standard classroom is ethnographic fieldwork. An educational trip in the country where the target language is spoken is always beneficial. Students can experience from within the unfamiliar culture, conducting interviews with locals and asking them to narrate stories. This cultural immersion is not just for advanced students but can be beneficial to beginner students looking to get involved with, engaged in, and inspired by the foreign language and its culture.

I CAN UNDERSTAND YOU!

I am confident that every teacher and every student of a foreign language will love teaching and learning through folktales! Folktales can help students to expand reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills; they are effortless avenues for

learning new vocabulary, understanding grammar, and being exposed to foreign cultures. All of this, in an alternative and entertaining way: That is the power of folktales. Let's try to deconstruct the jocular fairy tales in which the protagonists could not understand a word and misunderstood everything. The same folktales that parody the difficulties of not knowing a foreign language can actually help in overcoming those obstacles and enable communication with foreign peoples. So we may be able to say, at the end of the day, "Yes, I can understand you!"

APPENDIX A

Creative Writing in a Foreign-Language Classroom

OBJECTIVES

Students were completely free to express themselves in a foreign language (in my case, Modern Greek), and thus they practiced and developed their writing skills in a creative way. To engage teamwork and peer learning, introductory-level students were divided into small groups. One group wrote a short poem, another a text in dialogue form between friends, and the third a short story, all based on fairy tales. The intermediate- and advanced-level students each wrote a creative essay. Because they were more advanced in the language, this second group was able to write at greater length and thus make fuller use of fairy-tale structure, motifs, and plots. Some students also included drawings (with and without subtitles) to support their stories. For the introductory level, this activity was assessed as part of their homework grade, whereas for the higher levels it was part of their final essay project (thus accounting for a larger percentage of their grade).

OUTCOMES

The results were rewarding. I concentrate here on one intermediate- and one advanced-level student. The student from the intermediate class wrote two short stories resembling fairy tales and myths. The first story tells of a male good spirit and the beautiful woman who demands his magic power. The spirit refuses, the woman screams, the sky darkens, and stream waters run as blood. Ultimately, the sky opens to shine light, and at the end of the tale the woman is transformed into stone. His second story, titled “The Fairytale of Love,” begins with Eros, the god of Love, shooting his arrow at two little mice. In the end, all the animals of the earth become friends and there is no more fighting among them. The student read his stories in class, and another student wrote a critical analysis of them in Modern Greek! The second student did an excellent close reading and was able to write a short theoretical essay based on these two new fairy tales written by her classmate.

The student from the advanced class wrote her modern fairy tale (“The Princess in the Castle”) to resemble Disney versions of tales. In addition, she used drawings of famous Disney protagonists and replaced their faces with the faces of her classmates. This created a vivid reaction in class, where students recognized their faces as the princess, the prince, the villain, and the fairy.

At the end of the semester, I compiled all the creative writings of my language classes and published a booklet (Kaliambou, *Modern Greek*). This little publication was a beautiful crowning achievement of folktale storytelling techniques in the classroom.

EVALUATION

The students' reactions to this activity were quite positive. They immediately embraced the idea of this project and launched into their creativity with joy. This attitude of joy brought about delightful results. Creative writing in a foreign language can be challenging. Students may have various nice ideas, but it is hard to express them eloquently in a foreign language. Students need the aid of a dictionary and a grammar book to support their writings, and many of them use online tools to translate and write, which can bring questionable results. Yet despite the challenges they faced, they managed to express their thoughts and feelings effectively. Particularly through the use of fairy-tale motifs, they opened themselves up to saying more than they would have in other forms of writing.

APPENDIX B

“Cinderella” on Stage

OBJECTIVES

This theatrical activity was born in my advanced Modern Greek class on Greek folktales. Among the various stories students had to read was a Greek “Cinderella” version; they then had to talk about the tale and write a short response essay. The Greek tale is radically different from the well-known Disney version. The Greek folktale depicts a mother, her two evil elder daughters, and Cinderella, the youngest. The father is away in a foreign land in search of a decent job, so that he can send money back to his family. The mother cannot endure the disobedience of her two elder daughters and is transformed into a cow, which the two malevolent sisters kill and eat. Cinderella buries her mother’s bones and mourns for 40 days at the grave of her mother. After this period, the bones are transformed into gold coins. Cinderella brings the coins, unbeknownst to her sisters, into church for the Easter liturgy; she throws them into the congregation at midnight, when Christ is understood to rise from the dead, and then rushes out before anyone can sense it’s her. She performs the same ritual the following year, but the third year, the prince of the region smears honey on the steps of the church to catch her. Cinderella’s slipper gets stuck in the honey and the prince searches for the girl whose slipper he has caught. He learns it is Cinderella’s shoe, hears the story behind the gold coins, and falls in love. He marries Cinderella.

The American students found the Greek version unfamiliar and especially strange and foreign. “It’s a morbid story,” wrote one student. They compared it with their familiar cultural repertoire, which was mostly shaped by Disney productions. The different cultural elements of the Greek version helped to ignite and develop their cultural awareness and capture their fantasy. Questions such as “Why does Cinderella meet her prince at church instead of at a royal ball?” initiated discussions about the role of religion in Greek society. The rituals around mourning and lamenting constituted another area for intercultural analysis. Perhaps most viscerally, the students responded to the transformation of the mother into a cow and her being cannibalized at the hands of the evil elder sisters.

Unexpected Outcomes

Theater Production

This standard reading comprehension activity had some wonderful unexpected results, which moved beyond the standard curriculum. One student was inspired to use the story of “Cinderella” as the underpinning of an interdisciplinary performance piece. He translated the tale and adapted the narrative by creating a logical reason for the folktale’s

fantastic circumstances. He used the motifs and plot to create his own “deconstructive” version in which there is no prince and no wedding at the end. Rather, he preferred to end the story with Cinderella casting out a demon from her sisters.

This student then directed a theater production performed by undergraduate students. He also enlisted a member of the Yale Women’s Slavic Chorus to prepare songs to be performed live as a musical accompaniment to certain movements and worked with a group of painters to create icons of the play’s characters, images that were strategically placed to emphasize the actions of a scene.

The play was performed for three nights at a theater in an undergraduate Yale college. This endeavor required a large crew of people involved in a variety of capacities, among them producer, dramaturge, kinetic consultant, technical director, lighting designer, musical director, and book designer.

BOOKLET

A playbill-style booklet accompanied the performance (Kaliambou, *Cinderella*). The playwright-director wrote an introductory note about the process of writing the play and the ideas underlying the adaptation and expansion of the source material. The dramaturge wrote a short piece on magic and morality in the new *Cinderella*, and a student in my literature class on folktales wrote a scholarly piece on internal and external space in the original tale.

Evaluation

The theater performance was a great success and was well received by other students and by the community. Students from various classes, not necessarily from my language or folktale classes, worked admirably together toward a production, which required huge time commitments outside the regular class time.

The performative aspect that fairy tales can offer is invaluable to any class—not just in language courses but also in regular literature classes. Particularly in a foreign-language class, by performing dialogues, observing repetitions, and appreciating the cultural context of the story in the target language, students can practice and promote their speaking and listening skills. In addition, theater play is an excellent opportunity for varied and intricate teamwork, fostering a strong feeling of community.

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