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Excerpt  
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# *I Theoretical background*

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## Introduction

Although they are certainly valuable in their own right – as good stories, as literature, as social and cultural expressions, and as moral teaching – folktales have many special characteristics that make them exceptionally good for language teaching. Their frequent repetitions make them excellent for reinforcing new vocabulary and grammar. Many have natural rhythmic qualities that are useful for working on stress, rhythm, and intonation in pronunciation. And the cultural elements of folktales help both bridge common ground between cultures and bring out cultural differences – developing cultural awareness that is essential if we are to learn to think in another language and understand the people who speak it.

Because folktales began as oral stories, they also have many characteristics that make them easier to understand than other types of literature. Since folktales are often published as children’s books with easy language and context-providing illustrations, many are accessible to students with limited language abilities. Yet there are also many more difficult, literary retellings of folktales. This means that folktales provide material for all levels from beginner to advanced, with natural bridges from each level to the next. The varying levels of difficulty also make folktales very useful in the multilevel classroom.

In addition, folktales are especially useful for developing cognitive and academic skills. For example, academic tasks often require students to compare, contrast, and evaluate. You can require students to use these skills at nearly any language level by having them read or listen to different versions of folktales (for example, the French, Japanese, and Native American versions of Cinderella), identify how they are similar and different, and then consider how important the similarities and differences are. Folktales are similarly well suited for academic skills like analyzing, drawing inferences, synthesizing, summarizing, and noticing underlying text structures.

Folktales also fit well with the growing emphasis on content-based instruction and with communicative approaches that focus on teaching language while communicating meaning. Folktales fit in not only with literature but also with sociology, history, religion, and anthropology.

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And folktales, because of their moral nature, fit in with values education, an aspect that a growing number of educators feel has been critically lacking in mainstream language teaching.

Finally, as we will see, folktales are excellent for addressing listening, speaking, reading, and writing – either separately or in integration with each other. Because of the many different versions and the varieties of potential activities, they are especially suitable for use in the multilevel classroom. Because of their flexibility, folktales can also be easily integrated with a variety of approaches to language teaching.

### **Just what is a folktale?**

The term “folktale” is used for several related kinds of stories. Most narrowly, a folktale is a traditional story that has been passed on by word of mouth – told from parent to child over many generations or passed on by countless storytellers sitting around countless evening fires. No one knows who the original author was, and there are usually different versions of the same story. *The Stonecutter* (see page 5) is an example of this.

In addition to referring to these directly oral stories themselves, the term “folktale” has also been used to refer to literary retellings of these tales. Thus, even though *Little Red Riding Hood* began as an oral tale, Perrault’s retelling begins like this:

There was once upon a time a little village girl, the prettiest ever seen or known, of whom her mother was dotingly fond. Her grandmother was even fonder of her still, and had a little red hood made for the child, which suited her so well that wherever she went she was known by the name of Little Red Riding Hood. . . .

These literary folktales use the same basic stories and themes, and they keep some of their oral characteristics, but they are often longer, and their language is often both more ornate and more difficult.

Some more recent stories with identifiable authors include many or all of the traditional characteristics of oral folktales. For example, I wrote *The Princess’s Suitors* myself (see page 122), intentionally incorporating both the style and the themes that are common in oral folktales. Using the term more loosely, these stories are also called folktales.

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Intermediate

## The Stonecutter

Once there was a poor stonecutter. Each day he went to the mountain and cut blocks of stone, and then took them to the market to sell.

He was quite happy, until one day he looked through the gate of a rich man's house. He saw the rich man sitting in the shade with servants bringing him food to eat.

"Surely the rich man is greater than I am," sighed the poor stonecutter. "If only I were a rich man, then I would be truly happy."

The spirit of the mountain heard the stonecutter and gave him what he wanted. At once the stonecutter found himself sitting in the garden of a nice house with servants bringing him food.

"Now I will be truly happy," thought the stonecutter. But a few days later the rich man looked out the window. He saw the king's palace. He saw many servants hurrying to obey the king, and he saw how great the king's palace was.

"Surely the king is greater than I am," he sighed. "If only I were a king, then I would be truly happy."

The spirit of the mountain heard the stonecutter and gave him what he wanted. At once the stonecutter found himself sitting on a throne in a great palace, with servants hurrying to do whatever he wanted.

"Now I will be truly happy," thought the stonecutter. But a few days later he was standing outside. The sun was beating down on his head. It was so hot that he had to go inside.

"Surely the sun is greater than I am," he sighed. "If only I were the sun, then I would be truly happy."

The spirit of the mountain heard the stonecutter and gave him what he wanted. At once the stonecutter became the sun, burning in the sky. He shone down on the earth, and people cowered under the heat.

"Now I will be truly happy," thought the stonecutter. But soon a cloud came between him and the earth so that no one could see him.

"Surely the cloud is greater than I am," he sighed. "If only I were the cloud, then I would be truly happy."

The spirit of the mountain heard the stonecutter and gave him what he wanted. At once the stonecutter became a cloud,

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raining upon the earth. Where the rain came, people ran for their houses.

“Now I will be truly happy,” thought the stonecutter. But he noticed that when the rain beat down on the mountain, the mountain was not affected.

“Surely the mountain is greater than I am,” he sighed. “If only I were the mountain, then I would be truly happy.”

The spirit of the mountain heard the stonecutter and gave him what he wanted. At once the stonecutter became the mountain, strong and firm.

“Now I will be truly happy,” thought the stonecutter. But soon he noticed a small stonecutter coming up the side of the mountain. The stonecutter cut blocks of stone from the mountain and took them away.

“Surely the stonecutter is greater than I am,” he sighed. “If only I were a stonecutter, then I would be truly happy.”

The spirit of the mountain heard and gave him what he wanted. At once he was a poor stonecutter once again. At this he was thankful, and never wished again to be something that he was not.

#### **Notes on the Story**

This telling was mostly based on Japanese variants of this story. One published version with pictures that provide good support for the text is *The Two Stonecutters* by Eve Titus (1967).

Note that this story provides repeated occurrences of comparatives (here only *greater* was used, but others could be substituted) and conditionals (*if . . . then*).

Finally, stories known as “urban myths” or “urban legends” have appeared in recent years. They have many modern elements, but they are becoming (or perhaps have become) modern folktales. They generally have no known authors, and they have developed (and continue to develop) recognizable variant versions. Because they are passed from person to person, they are often oral in quality (though they are now often distributed over the Internet). Some of them are rooted in a real event; others – perhaps most – appear to be completely fictitious. In urban myths (unlike traditional folktales) the teller often believes the story is true. They are often told as having happened to a relative or acquaintance of a relative or acquaintance. For example, the teller might

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begin with, “Well, my boss said his wife knows this woman who told her about something that happened to her cousin. . . .” (The relationship of the teller to the person the story happened to is always too remote to verify the story.) They often have horrific or sexual themes. As such, they will not be suitable for many classrooms, but in the right contexts, they may be useful for raising questions about the values and direction of the society in which we live. As in traditional folktales, the element of horror is often tied to behavior that is not moral or that does not conform to social standards, though not all urban myths have an obvious moral.

There are several subtypes of folktales. Fables are very short folktales with animals as the main characters and with a very obvious moral lesson, often summed up in a single line at the end. Fairy tales are folktales that include some magical element (not necessarily fairies); the German word *märchen* is sometimes used for these. There are hero stories (like those about Johnny Appleseed or Paul Bunyan), some of which have some real historical parts and others of which may not. And there are myths, legends, parables, and Sufi stories. (Sufi stories are stories from a mystical Islamic tradition; the Nasrudin story on page 12 might be considered part of this tradition.) The point is not that we have to figure out which group any particular story belongs in; these groups often overlap and many stories fit into several categories. It is just helpful to realize that a wide variety of folktales are out there, all of which are potentially useful for language teaching. This variety not only adds interest but also helps ensure that there are ample materials for all levels and for a variety of approaches.

Intermediate

## **Cakes and Cider – An Urban Legend**

This is a true story that happened at Cambridge University. During an exam one day, a bright young student stood up and asked the professor to bring him cakes and cider.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the professor.

“I request that you bring me cakes and cider,” repeated the student.

“Certainly not,” replied the professor.

“Sir,” said the student, “I really must insist. I request and require that you bring me cakes and cider.”

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“Excuse me, young man,” said the professor, “but you are distracting the other students. Please quietly continue your work.”

At this point, the student produced a copy of the 400-year-old Laws of Cambridge, written in Latin, which were still – theoretically – in effect. He pointed to one section and announced, “It says here in the rules of our university, ‘Gentlemen taking examinations may request and require cakes and cider.’”

The professor examined the sheet, spoke quietly with the student, and then excused himself briefly. A short time later an assistant arrived with a soda and a hamburger. (Apparently they had agreed that this was an acceptable modern equivalent.) The student then wrote his exam, happily chewing and slurping away.

Three weeks later the student was fined five pounds for not wearing a sword to the examination.

**Notes on the Story**

Like traditional folktales, this urban legend has a number of variants. It always takes place at either Cambridge or Oxford in England, but the items the student may ask for vary. The student’s infraction also varies; for example, in one it is for not wearing a ceremonial sword, in another it is for not wearing shoes with silver buckles while on university premises. Another interesting variation involves when the student is fined for his violation of the rules; in some cases it happens immediately (showing the professor outsmarting the student by knowing the ancient rules better than the student did); in others, it takes the professor or university several weeks to find the item for which to fine the student. One variant presents a student who calls for a pint of cider during class but is reprimanded by the lecturer for not wearing a tabard, or tunic. The student later arrives for the final examination so dressed and receives his pint.

Note the beginning of the story: It is not unusual for an urban legend to begin by announcing that it is a true story.

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## **Characteristics that contribute to easy reading and listening**

Although there is a lot of variation between one folktale and the next, and even between two tellings of the same tale, certain characteristics typical in folktales contribute to relatively easy reading. These include:

- Time-ordered story structure
- Repetition and redundancy
- Predictability
- Relatively simple grammar
- Concrete vocabulary
- Concrete ideas
- Illustrations that provide support and context for the text
- A unique reader–writer relationship

These are explained more fully in the following pages.

### *Time-ordered story structure*

When presenting an argument or conveying information, different cultures have very different ways of arranging material, or even of deciding what material to include. But when it comes to telling stories, all cultures appear to do the same thing: tell about events in the order they happened. *First . . . then . . . after this . . . finally . . .* Time provides a structure for the story. One culture may speak in terms of passing hours, another of the position of the sun, still another of the waxing and waning of the moon, but the idea is the same: Material is arranged in time order.

A familiar discourse structure makes a text easier to understand and remember. Since folktales use a structure that is familiar to everyone, they are more readily understandable than many other types of literature.

### *Repetition and redundancy*

When you are listening, you can't slow down or go back and reread if you miss something. Because of this, stories that have come from an oral tradition tend to have much more repetition and redundancy than those that haven't. One type of repetition is the repetition of main themes. For example, in *The Three Little Pigs* (*The Three Little Goats* in Middle Eastern cultures), each pig's encounter with the wolf follows the same pattern: The pig builds a house, the wolf comes and asks to be let in, the pig says "No," and the wolf then tries to blow the house down. (Note: This story is commonly known and so not included in this book.) Another example of the repetition of main ideas is seen in both *The Stonecutter* (Japanese; see page 5) and *The Fisherman's Wife*



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(European; page 232). In both of these stories, the main characters begin in a very humble place in life; they wish for more and more powerful stations in life, thinking that this will make them happy; in the end, they end up back where they started.

In addition to repetition of key themes, sometimes sections are repeated word for word many times in the story. The repetition may consist of short phrases like the “Not by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin” and “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down” in *The Three Little Pigs* and the “Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman” in *Jack and the Beanstalk* (see page 246), or it may be longer refrains, such as the “*Cow (sheep, horse, mill) of mine, cow of mine, Have you ever seen a maid o’ mine, With a wig and a wag and a long leather bag, Who stole all the money I ever had?*” that occurs nine times in *Gold in the Chimney* (see page 269).

Sometimes there are also building refrains – portions that repeat and get longer each time. This can be especially useful for language learning, since a great deal of material is repeated, but students only need to deal with one new piece at a time. *Stone Soup* (see page 83) provides a good example of this. Near the beginning of the story we find:

So the man stirred the pot with the salt and the pepper and the round, gray stone.

And the woman said, “Imagine that – soup from a stone.”

One ingredient at a time, the refrain builds until we find near the end of the story:

. . . So the man stirred the pot with the creamy, yellow butter; the round yellow onion; the fine, white flour; the long, red bone; the leafy, purple cabbage; the long, orange carrots; the salt and the pepper; and the round, gray stone.

And the woman said, “Imagine that – soup from a stone.”

In addition to broad repetitions of theme and repeated refrains, numerous local redundancies also occur in folktales. The wolf is not merely going to blow; he is going to huff and puff and blow. The man in *It Could Always Be Worse* (page 88) is not just a man with difficulties; he is always a “poor unfortunate man” with difficulties. Saying the same thing more than once or in more than one way helps students get the idea even if they missed it the first time.

The repetitions help language learners in several ways. Repetition is important in helping new vocabulary stick in the mind. Repetition also gives students many examples of a particular grammatical form in context. For example, some tellings of *Stone Soup* have more than half a dozen examples of negative conditionals with *if . . . then . . . , but not*

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so. . . : “If only you had some (carrots, onions, barley, etc.), then this soup would be (perfect, fit for a king, etc.), but you don’t, so we’ll just make do with what we have.” Repetitions also help students become more automatic in their recognition of language – an important part of becoming fluent. Finally, repetitions make a story easier to understand for at least two reasons: They make the story more predictable (this is discussed below), and they give students less new language to process. For example, even though *The Stonecutter* (page 5) is about 570 words long, it isn’t 570 words of new material; there is a brief introduction, a single-line conclusion, and one basic event that is repeated six times. Reading this story is no more difficult than reading a 200-word story without any repetition.

#### *Predictability*

When we can predict or guess well at what is coming, it is easier to deal with difficulties and gaps in understanding; when we have no idea what is coming, the text is potentially much more difficult to understand. Two aspects of folktales make them predictable: the repetitions of main events and ideas, and the moral or ethical quality that lies behind many folktales.

Aside from reviewing vocabulary and grammar, repetitions in folktales help the listener or reader guess what is coming. After the wolf has blown the first little pig’s house down, we can guess what will happen when the wolf knocks at the second pig’s door. After the rabbi has told the poor, unfortunate man to bring his chickens and goose into his house, we can guess what will happen when the rabbi asks the man if he has a goat (see page 88). When the old woman claims she has nothing and the beggar gets her to bring out carrots and cabbage for the soup, we know what will happen when the beggar expresses his wish for flour, onion, and butter (see page 83). Similarly, when the little boy cries wolf and the townsmen come running twice for nothing, we can predict what will happen when the wolf actually appears (see page 139).

The moral nature of folktales also makes them predictable. Folktales have been used to teach about values in many societies, and we often find characters in folktales that clearly demonstrate particular moral qualities. We find lazy and hardworking sons, the wicked stepmother, the miserly man, the wise woman, and the like. There is no subtle character development and no subtle working with moods and feelings. Although in real life, life doesn’t always seem fair, in folktales it usually is: The hardworking girl who is badly mistreated will marry the prince in the end, and the wicked, lazy stepsisters will miss out; the proud sons who fail to help the old beggar by the road will fail in their task, while the