

LEARNING THROUGH TALES: USING FOLKTALES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract:- Folklores and folktales are a part of traditional story that has been passing on orally from one person to another before writing system was developed. These tales form an important part of mainstream literature and represent distinct cultural identity of different places. Folktales thus have been an eternal part of every culture since ages. These tales, at the basic level deal with stories of goodness, honesty, reward and punishment, the prevalence of good over evil and so on. Various studies have been conducted on folktales from time to time dealing with sociological, historical, cultural, psychological viewpoints. However, in the field of language teaching, the richness and potentiality of folktales seem to have been under-utilized in today's language classes. It is true that folktales contribute a lot towards language learning. This paper aims to study the linguistic and structural analysis of folktales and argue that folktales are a major vehicle for teaching English language as a foreign and second language. It will focus on how a teacher needs to properly manage folktales in class to facilitate English as Foreign Language learning among students. An attempt has been made to do an online survey to gather further information regarding the role of folktales in facilitating language learning.

Keywords: creativity, cultural-awareness, folktales, language, science, tradition.

1) **Introduction:-**

The use of English language as the dominant language in the global context has promoted the teaching and learning of English as the first foreign language to be taught in schools. English as a foreign language is basically taught from the primary level to the university post graduate levels. Since English has acquired an international status all over the world, therefore, necessary steps are to be taken to facilitate English language learning and motivate students to communicate fluently in English. This paper aims at learning English as a second language with the help of folk tales in English Language Teaching classrooms.

Children learn and create their mother tongue not by formal education as sitting in front of the desk, learning his L1 language and struggling to figure out the meaning of sentences. It happens automatically to him. But in case of L2, several factors lead to the development of L2 language learning. In addition to this, nursery rhymes as well as stories and folktales may facilitate one's interest in the development of L2. They contain repetitive patterns of speech and words that reinforce vocabulary and are highly generative in learning L2.

2) **Using Literature in Classrooms:-**

Literature can be used in classrooms for many good reasons. One of them is to facilitate language learning in particular. Along with language learning, the potentiality of literature is to facilitate and nurture emotional intelligence and communicational skills. Quality literature provides a good model for rich, natural language and a variety of different registers. Literature thus, provides a motivating and low anxiety context for language learning (particularly in case of EFL learners). Children are naturally drawn towards stories and many language learners come from rich backgrounds of storytelling.

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Stories have been the guiding light to humanity since long time- from the moment a person is born, to becoming adults, one is surrounded by stories. When we are children, parents and grand-parents narrates various fairies and folktales to which children enjoy listening. “Folktales in general, are the part of folk literature, which is more widely referred to as folklore. A folktale is a traditional story that has been passed on by words before writing system was developed.” (Lwin, 2008).

Therefore, folktales are fables, i.e., and tales with animals as the main characters and an explicit moral lesson, fairy tales, i.e. tales with some magical elements, myth, i.e. tales which are considered sacred, among other sub-types. It also includes tales of ghosts, urban legends, anecdotes, animal fables and so on. The following diagram is an illustration of folklores.

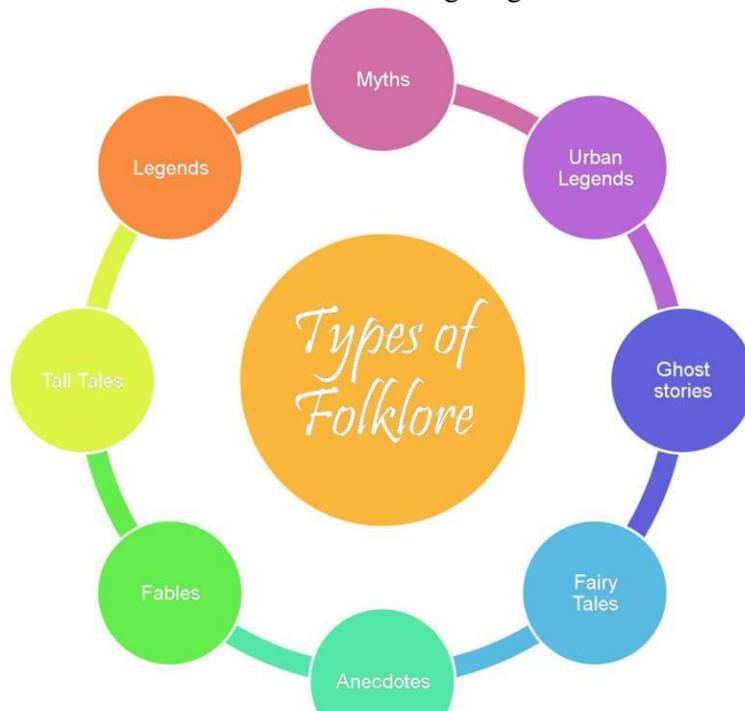


Fig. 2.1: Types of Folklores

Through the folktales people express their values, fears, hopes and dreams. These tales are basically oral that deals with various aspect of cultural heritage of a particular place. But, with

the development of technology, these tales have acquired a printed version and has created its own space in the canons of children literature. “With the development of writing systems and other forms of technologies, oral tales from various cultures have been transformed into written forms. Some have become a part of the canon of children’s literature.” (Carpenter and Prichard, 1984).

However, there are certain characteristics of folktales that help in the development of the learner. They can be described as follows:-

- a) Folktales are motivating and can help to develop a positive attitude towards the learning of second language (particularly EFL). They can thus create a desire to continue learning.
- b) Stories fuel imagination. Children can particularly associate themselves with the story’s characters and this imaginative experience will in turn help to describe his feelings using the English language.
- c) Listening to stories in a class, reading and writing promotes excitement and anticipation for building up the child’s confidence and encourage language development.
- d) Children enjoy listening to stories over and over again. This is a positive aspect. Many stories contain a natural repetition of particular vocabulary and sentence structure. This helps the children in learning every details of the story.

3) Managing Folktales in English Language Teaching Classrooms:-

Management is the science and art of getting things done with the help of others. If we focus on the management principles of folktales in an ELT classroom then the teacher has to look down on certain aspects for facilitating L2 learning, i.e. the English language learning to the students in a class. “Folktales have the characteristics of literary creativity. Defined at the level

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of language, literary creativity involves manipulation of sounds, words, phrases or overall linguistic form of the text.” (Maybin and Pearce, 2006).

Therefore, there are three main dimensions for the management of folktales in an English Language Learning class.

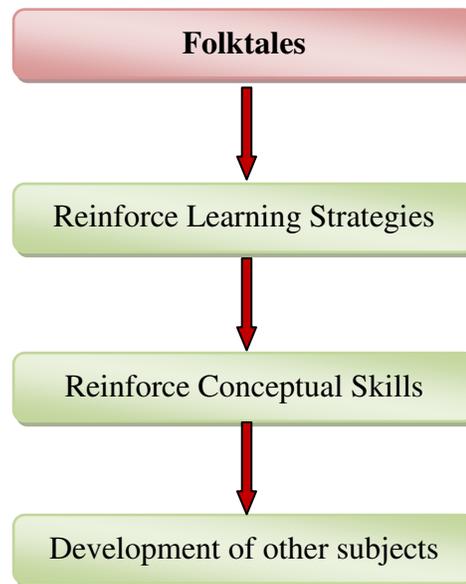


Fig. 3.1:- Dimensions of Folktales in ELT

- i) Stories reinforce learning strategies. It covers the following categories-
 - a) To reinforce thinking strategies e.g. predicting, comparing and contrasting the characters, problem solving and so on.
 - b) To reinforce the learning of English for e.g. to figure out new words, to strengthen vocabulary and to figure out the meaning of these newly coined words.
 - c) To reinforce study skills for e.g. to make oneself acquainted with the use of dictionaries, organizing work and so on.
- ii) Folktales can be used to reinforce conceptual development in the child for e.g. shapes, colours, sizes, time etc.

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iii) Carefully selected stories can also be useful for the development of other subjects in the curriculum such as-

- a) Mathematics- telling about time, numbers, probability, etc.
- b) History- understanding chronology.
- c) Geography and Environment- as scenes, maps, landscapes and so on.

4) Adapting Stories:-

“In the field of language teaching, the richness and potential of folktales seems to have been under-utilized in today’s language class.” (Bean and Taylor, 2000). It is true that these folktales focus on the moral development of children. Therefore, according to many critics these folktales neglect the over-all language development of the child. But this is not the case. Focusing particularly from the management aspect, there are certain ways of dealing with the folktales in language learning class.

- i) **Planning**- the teacher has to plan out what stories are applicable for facilitating L2 in the class. To achieve an efficient and effective manner, planning and selecting the stories becomes necessary. The advantage of using selected materials provides real language development in the class. Very often it is seen that oversimplified use of language can either facilitate language learning at a fast pace or this may lead to slow down and deceptive learning for both the teacher as well as the L2 learners.



Fig. 4.1:- Language facilitation using Folktales

- ii) **Organizing**- a teacher should know how to organize the class and create learning activities in a friendly classroom environment. Here comes the role of the teacher to encourage the students in reading, speaking and writing as well as constructing narratives of his own. This in turn will lead to the development of L2 in the students.

| While selecting the tales, consider:- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Language difficulty | Content appropriateness | Cognitive Load |
| Instructional objectives | Interactive opportunities | Extensive Opportunities |

Fig. 4.2:- Organizing Folktales in ELT

- iii) **Directing**- directing and planning are interrelated. Directing is the supervision used by the teachers towards the students of L2. The teacher can use a wide variety of folktales that children are already familiar with, such as traditional stories and fairytales.

| While Story-telling, consider:- | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Prepare the Environment | Prepare audience for Listening | Know where you are headed and how you get there | Evaluate continuously and adapt accordingly |

Fig. 4.3:- Directing Folktales in ELT Classrooms

- iv) **Controlling**- it refers to the way the performance of the learners are checked. If controlling is not done in a proper manner, there will be misbalance in learning.

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Therefore, the teacher should take necessary steps while dealing with the stories to the learners.

| After Story-telling:- | |
|--|--|
| Make your shared experience real through extension and reflection activities | Evaluate and reflect in order to improve. Try again! |

Fig. 4.4:- Benefits of Storytelling

5) Folktales and Language learning-

“Defined at the level of language, literary creativity involves manipulation of sounds, words, phrases or over-all linguistic form of the text.” (Maybin and Pearce,2006). Folktales can be very essential in the learning of EFL in the following ways-

- a) Strengthen vocabulary-
 - i) To check the unfamiliar content of words.
 - ii) To look for idioms and phrases.
 - iii) To check the clarity of writing.

- b) Grammar-
 - i) To look at the various use of tenses.
 - ii) To check the sentence pattern.
 - iii) To check the word order.

- c) The creative use of ideas-

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- i) To look for the ways how ideas are linked.
- ii) To look the ways by which ideas are explained.

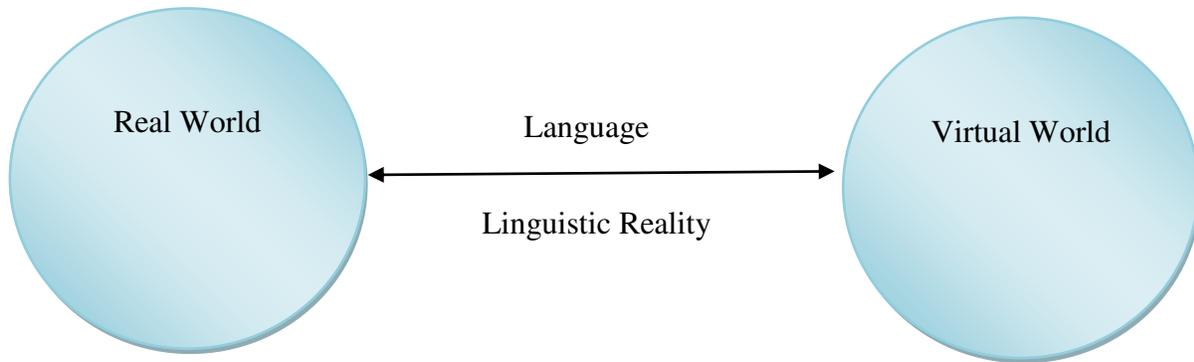


Fig. 5.1:- Constructing Folktales using Language as a medium

The above diagram shows the concept that we live in a real world and folktales is a part of the literary world and this part of literature is composed of language. Therefore, language is the vehicle to carry ideas into reality. Folktales are therefore the creative use of language.

6) Plot of Folktales-

“A plot must have a beginning, middle and an end.” (*Poetics*, Aristotle). Therefore every story must follow this structure of narration to achieve fullness in the narrative. Following is the diagram of plot.

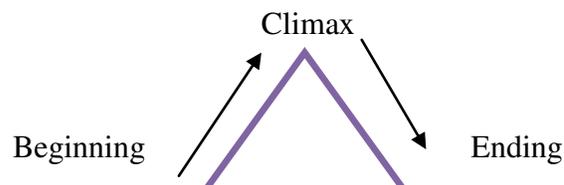


Fig 6.1:- The Plot of Folktales

Now, a small scale survey was carried out to study the folktale of *The Little Red Riding Hood*.

The main objective of the study was to see the literary creativity amongst the students of English

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Literature class. The main story provided is of 230 words. The students were asked to compress the story within 20 words. Here are some of the examples of the survey-

- i) Little girl saved from big bad wolf. (7 Words).
- ii) The wolf beaten up and runs away. Girl saved. (9 Words).
- iii) Girl learns wisdom. Wolf shoed away. (6 Words).

So from the above narratives we can see that the story is compressed and the most important things come in the front and the less important things are omitted. Hence we can see an inversion of the triangle as follows-

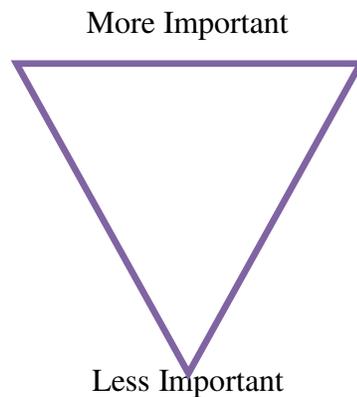


Fig 6.2:- Inversion of the Plot

Focusing on the characters of the folktales we see that the general outline comprises mainly of the good and the bad characters where every good character is rewarded and the bad characters are punished. The following diagram narrates this-

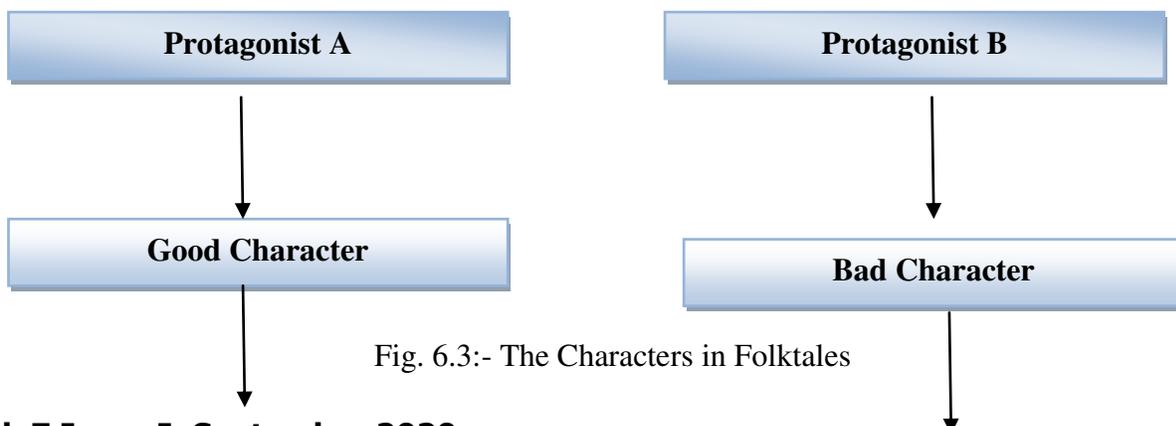


Fig. 6.3:- The Characters in Folktales

7) **Approaches to boost up language learning for EFL learners using folktales:-**

- i) **The Q-A approach:-** In this approach, after a story is being narrated, the teacher can ask questions related to the topics such as who, what, where, how and when of the plot. For making comprehension more communicative, the teacher can also ask questions to twist the plot and gather new insight to the story. Questions such as- what would you have done? What would the character have done and so on.

- ii) **The Linguistic Approach:-** It drills exercises in phonetics, semantics, morphology and syntax. One important aspect that folktales teach us is to deal with language in an explicit manner. Introduction to language systems such as lexicons, verbal-phrases and grammatical systems are encouraged in learning.

- iii) **The Communicative Approach:-** Here the discussion of topics can lead to the development of language learning and students get an opportunity to recreate and reinvent story of their own.

- iv) **The Written Approach:-** In this approach, emphasis is given on rewriting, summarizing or paraphrasing the whole story.

8) Folktales and Culture:-

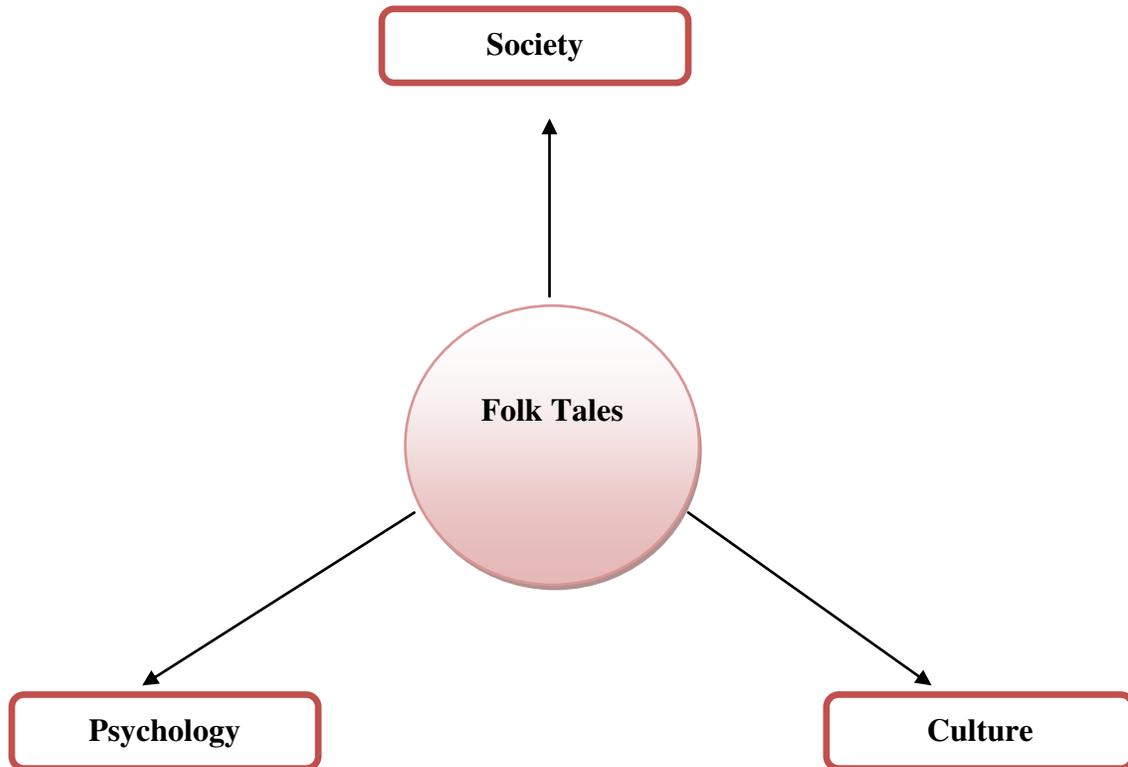


Fig. 8.1:- The Scope of Folktales

In every society, there are different stories that have a common structure. These stories are carried down from one generation to the next and thus they form a major identity of the community. Although the people are separated through place and time, yet the structure of these tales remain the same throughout cultures. “The characteristics of universality or similarity of the fundamental event sequence in folktales from various cultures makes these tales one of the most accessible vehicles for language learning.” (Bean, 1999).

An example can be cited here to demarcate the cultural bridge between these stories. We have the story of Cinderella in European culture and another story runs through the same line as this one in case of Assamese culture. This is the story of Tejimola. The archetypal character here in both the stories is the same.

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Tejimola has become the quintessential figure- the female survivor of patriarchal dominance in Assamese society. She finds her voice in Lakshminath Bezbaruah's Burhi Air Xadhu- the first major collection of Assamese folk tales. "When folktales of the target language are used, the cultural elements of folktales also help to bridge common ground between cultures and at the same time bring out the differences between them." (Taylor, 2000). Tejimola is not only confined to Assamese culture. Instead, she finds her voice and a place in English poetry too because of globalization. In Uddipana Goswami's *Tejimola: Never Say Die*, the poet narrates:-

*"But having been a creeper,
A flowering plant and a lotus,
I did not want to be a wife.
But nobody asked me.
So I left when it got to me.
They searched of course
But I'd learnt to disguise well
And they gave up.
Now I live and die
A plant, a creeper,
A vine, a flower.
I live and die,
Tejimola forever."*

(Tejimola: Never Say Die; Uddipana Goswami)

It is the translation and elaboration of the Assamese lines-

“Hatu nemelibi phulu nisingibi

Kore naoria toi

Manuhe phulor ki jane ador

Tejimola he moi.”

(Burhi Aair Xadhu; Lakshminath Bezbaruah)

(The proper English translation stands as:- “Don’t stretch your hand, don’t pluck the flower, what boatman are you? Humans don’t understand the value of flowers, it’s me Tejimola.”)

So from the above example we see how folktales have crossed linguistic boundaries and established a new space for its own. According to the Russian Formalists, language plays an important role for the literary creativity for any piece of work. Thus, the formalists focused on language as the main criteria of literature.

Therefore, language learning can be interesting and it can take the learners to a next level of learning higher variations in language.

9) Relevance of Folktales in Today’s Society:-

Although folktales form a major part of our society and culture, giving us an insight to the norms and values of our society and it helps to educate, illustrate, enlighten and inspire; yet, folktales put forward certain ideas that are practically not relevant in the present scenario.

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Development of science and technology has shattered various belief systems. With the coming of technology, many superstitious beliefs are uprooted from the society. This has taken us towards the development of mankind. But these folktales uphold various issues of magic and fantasy. Since, these are taught to the children, they perceive the world in an irrational manner.

In folktales, such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Arabian Nights*, we have examples of how these tales deal with image of the witch, black magic and other supernatural happenings. “Like other forms of literature, folktales call for the audience to have a certain willing suspension of disbelief about their fictitious characters and events.” (Dorson. 1963). It is true that while dealing with folktales, one must leave his rational mind behind and enjoy the story without delving into the realities of the world. S.T.Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, speaks of the willing suspension of disbelief where he theorizes the role of human mind to suspend the belief system and enjoy the story with all its supernatural happenings. After all, literature is to be enjoyed instead of being scientifically rational.

Yet, critics argue that the concepts such as heaven and hell should not be incorporated within the frame work of the folktales. In recent generation where new galaxies and planets are discovered, these tales should also focus in looking forward to incorporate subjects as such. Children should be made aware of the recent trends and worldviews from the very beginning.

In famous Indian folktales such as *The Panchatantras* and *Jataka Tales*, we have whole lot of animals and birds talking to each other. Although, these stories instill values such as

honesty, discipline and truthfulness but these folktales are totally absurd. Here we see animals behaving just like humans.

Therefore modern folklorists should aim at looking towards things in a more scientific manner and bring out the rationalities of human mind and behavior from the early stage of development.

10) Online Survey:-

To study the role of folktales in the present day context, an online survey has been carried out in this field.

Aim of the survey-

- To study how folktales foster different learning approaches in today's society.
- To study how folktales foster English Language Learning.
- To study how folktales bridge cultural gaps.

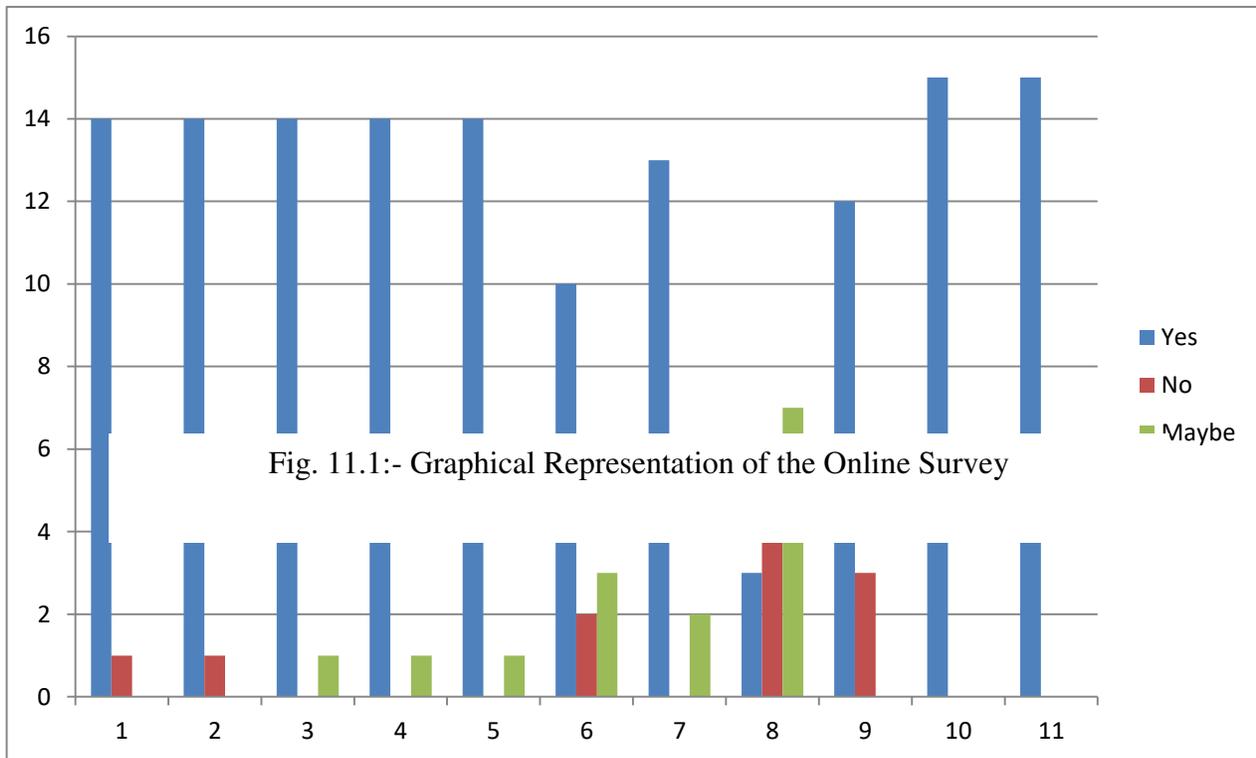
Methodology:-

- An online survey form has been created and sent to various people to record their views.
- The records were then collected and processed through pie-charts.
- Among the responses received, 7 were professors of various fields, 2 were research scholars and 6 were students of the age group of 22.

11) The Survey:-

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Yes</u> | <u>No</u> | <u>Maybe</u> |
|--|------------|-----------|--------------|
| 1. Do you read folktales? | 14 | 1 | 0 |
| 2. Do you like folktales? | 14 | 1 | 0 |
| 3. Do you think it affects psychology? | 14 | 0 | 1 |
| 4. Does it help in enhancing culture? | 14 | 0 | 1 |
| 5. Does it facilitate language learning? | 14 | 0 | 1 |
| 6. Does it promote superstitious beliefs? | 10 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. Does the moral lesson provided at the end of these tales helps in moulding one's character? | 13 | 0 | 2 |
| 8. Do you think there is any connection with science? | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| 9. Do you think scientific ideas must be promoted in folktales? | 12 | 3 | 0 |
| 10. Do you think stories are an easy way to facilitate language learning? | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| 11. Do you think folktales should be included in the curriculum? | 15 | 0 | 0 |

Table 1:- Online Survey on Folktales



4) With the way of narrating the story.

5) To know about people of other places

6) It is the carrier of folk culture, the customs, beliefs and their notion toward life of a particular community. We find the original form of human existence without any trace of artificiality of modernization. That's why; they are the reservoir of culture.

7) It helps by rummaging history and one's origin.

8) It is the preserver of original forms of cultural practices and habits.

9) Folktales narrate incidents of different places in a lucid, comprehensive manner. Therefore it becomes easier to grasp the cultural dimensions of that place and people.

10) It passes down knowledge in oral form and the generations benefit from it.

11) It preserves the values of different cultures. It talks about the fundamental virtues, vices. It shows a route of humane and stable life to the modern/urban living.

12) Folktales of different countries. Places within the countries, states differ with the content and the character portrayed in it. Some it is influenced and reflects a particular culture as we can observe the mythological folktales or of ancient times. So it relates and connects to one emotions and feelings and promotes integrity of cultural values and norms.

13) It helps by spreading shared values in a society that further promotes the betterment of the individual as well as the society.

2. What values of folktales have you carried with yourself?

1) To judge ones character.

2) The values of truthfulness, honesty, punctuality.

3) To be a better person.

- 4) Truthfulness, honesty, etc.
- 5) The root of being a human which finds its solace amidst nature and purest human relationship.
A kind of memory. Charm of childhood and nostalgia.
- 6) Moral lessons attached in the end.
- 7) Charm for childhood, value for human relationship.
- 8) Slow and steady wins the race, honesty.
- 9) Values such as punctuality, honesty, etc.
- 10) Time and again the tales that I heard in my childhood come to me at opportune moments to help in day to day transactions with the people around. Fortitude is one such value that I have learned from these tales.
- 11) The importance of fate/destiny; the fall brought by pride and anger.
- 12) Every folktale teaches us a moral lesson. So it helps to relate with all the moral values that can't be taught through the classroom teaching.
- 13) The values of being hopeful in the face of despair and helping others whenever we can.

12) **Findings-**

So the above survey along with the graphical representation depicts the role of folktales in today's society. It is seen that out of the majority of people, most of them prefer reading folktales. They have developed a liking for this genre of literature. This is a positive aspect of our paper which has enabled us to determine and trace the role of folktales in facilitating language learning. People have carried values such as honesty, punctuality and morality with them in their walks of life. Along with this, it is seen that majority of them desire to inculcate

folktales in the curriculum. It is also evident that majority of the population think that folktales are an easy medium to facilitate language learning. Folktales have also enabled people to know about their rich cultural heritage. This has finally brought us to the conclusion that folktales are an important medium in the learning of L2 language.

13) Reflections:-

In the field of English language teaching stories has been playing a major role in language learning. Teachers are an important determinant of successful teaching learning. Teachers need to facilitate the students interest in learning and create an environment that is friendly for language learning. Hence, one needs to be creative and innovative in their teaching planning and implementation of their practice. From text book selection to implementation and facilitation of language teacher should be active.

Finding appropriate supplementary teaching materials are essential. When teachers have a great awareness of the selection and use of appropriate references they are contributing to achieving the objectives of teaching English as Foreign Language. The EFL teachers are particularly cognizant of students' basic EFL skills and students' sense of belonging to their local culture and the role this plays in fostering the students' cultural identity.

14) Conclusion:-

Stories educate, illustrate, enlighten, and inspire. They give relief from the routine work and stimulate the mind. They are a great motivator for teachers as well as for students. Storytelling is learned slowly over a long time, but the novice and the expert storyteller can both experience success on different levels. A storyteller eventually makes a personal collection of

stories for various occasions and purposes. Storytelling is a folk-art which can't be manipulated, intellectualized, or mass-produced. Its magic is unique. The storyteller is always a teacher, and the teacher is always a storyteller. All teaching methods and suggestions in this article may be adapted to different grade and proficiency levels depending upon the type of literature chosen.

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Bio-Note

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