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Using Fairy Tales to Develop Reading and Writing Skills

Fairy tales can be defined as narratives that contain improbable events, scenes, and characters and that often convey a whimsical, satirical, or moralistic theme (Baynton, 1996). These tales, traditionally written or told for the amusement of children, invite readers to reflect on the origin of certain social practices and issues and even to question their current validity.

Because they draw on readers' imagination and emotions, fairy tales provide useful tools that allow students to freely express their opinions on themes related to human nature. In addition, because the characters in these tales are not the kind of people we meet daily, students can easily debate characters' decisions, either justifying, rejecting, or sympathizing with them (Wright, 1996). Fairy tales also provide a fertile environment for teachers to present both narrative structure and key elements such as plot, setting, characters, the organization of events, and the overall message of the story. Thus, fairy tales offer readers a richness of theme and language that is perfectly suited to students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL).

The following article presents a framework for the exploitation of fairy tales in EFL and ESL courses. Specifically, it discusses (a) ways to enhance student comprehension of this genre (Swales, 1990) and (b) ways to use fairy tales as a trigger for subsequent written work. The framework and accompanying activities are based on the belief that exploring a text in detail requires focusing on certain key elements that students can then use to develop their own writing.

Characterization of the Genre and Pedagogical Implications

With an abundance of fairy tales to choose from, text selection is not a complex matter. Some stories we have used with upper-intermediate students are *Pinocchio*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Ugly Duckling*, and *Snow White*. These tales reflect folk wisdom and have universal appeal. From a rhetorical perspective, they have a straightforward narrative style, with conventionalized beginnings and endings and a persuasive aim. Linguistically, they offer many examples of formulaic language, using such phrases as "once upon a time" and "happily ever after." Characters are simply defined and are often archetypal. Typical themes include the confrontation of positive versus negative forces (with plenty of instances of good overcoming evil), the heroic

virtues of justice, and the values or anti-values that are present in society. Key events are introduced to disrupt the equilibrium of ordinary, expected circumstances, to provoke the reader's response in an attempt to reinstate a sense of balance (Ochs, 1997).

The lexical, conceptual, and cultural dimensions of a fairy tale need to be made comprehensible to students so that there is room for the rediscovery—or sometimes the first discovery—of the pleasures of reading classics and of their importance and function in our lives. Though fairy tales have particular appeal to children, they are also well-suited for adults, who already have the background knowledge and fairy tale schema needed to interpret the language of the story. This familiarity with the themes and the traditional discourse format facilitates students' transition from reading to writing practice.

The tasks presented below draw on the accepted view that students should become aware of rhetorical conventions and lexical items in text before applying a similar model to their own written work. Our approach is consistent with Schmidt's (1994) noticing hypothesis, which states that "noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input to intake for learning" (p. 17).

Possibilities for Text Analysis

The selection of appropriate fairy tales will depend on the course objectives and the students' proficiency levels, but it is always advisable to use engaging, relatively short texts, with topics that generate debate. For example, "The Ugly Duckling" may be an appropriate text as it questions the traditional concepts of beauty. "Little Red Riding Hood" is also an interesting text that presents the concepts of good and evil forces. Before launching into a specific fairy tale, a pre-reading activity involving fairy tales in general will heighten student interest in the genre and ease student entry into subsequent, more analytical tasks. One possibility is to have students discuss topics such as the following: (a) fairy tales they like the most or hate the most, (b) favorite fairy tale character(s), and (c) the most meaningful fairy tale. Questions that guide the reading and facilitate comprehension of a specific fairy tale can follow. For example, after being assigned to read a fairy tale, students can work in groups to find answers to the questions below, thus encouraging them to reconstruct the story.

1. What is the story about?
2. What is the plot and how is it developed?
3. How does this story compare with other fairy stories you know?
4. On which issues does the author make us reflect?

After this preliminary analysis, students' attention can be directed to the following useful analytical categories (Labov as cited in Brumfit & Carter, 1986):

1. Abstract—This involves a summary of what follows and answers the implied question: What's all this about? It is an optional category, not present in all stories.

2. Orientation or Exposition—This part of the story sets the scene and introduces the characters. It answers the questions: Who? When? What? Where?

3. Complication—This part of the story involves a conflict occurring, a problem appearing, or the lives of the characters being complicated in some way. It poses the question: What course of action is required?

4. Climax—This is the point where suspense is highest and matters are most threatening. It answers the question: What is the turning point in the story?

5. Resolution—This is where the author introduces a solution for the complication. It may not be a happy one; instead, the story may end in a surprising and unexpected way with a twist in the tale. It answers the questions: How did the story end? How was the conflict resolved?

6. Evaluation or Coda—This, in some stories, appears in a moral or in the writer's own personal evaluation of the events described. It answers the question: What is the point or the lesson of the story? It is another optional category.

The best way for students to understand these categories is to ask them to collaboratively analyze the story using this framework. Table 1 shows a student-generated sample¹ that illustrates how students can use the framework to arrive at a better understanding of the fairy tale.

Table 1
Sample: The Pied Piper

<i>Category</i>	<i>Illustration</i>
Orientation	Where? The town of Hamelin When? Unspecified time in the past Who? The happy people that lived there
Complication	Rats appeared and multiplied. The town Mayor was threatened by the townspeople. The Pied Piper appeared and helped the Mayor kill the rats.
Climax	The Pied Piper wanted to collect his money but was deceived. He played his pipe and all the children disappeared with him.
Evaluation	Let us all, dear reader, think well before we make promises we do not plan to keep. If, in our greed, we give less than we promised, we may get more than we bargain for.

Once this initial stage has been covered, a further in-depth analysis can evolve around the following aspects:

Analyzing characters. One of the main assets of fairy tales is that they often contain illustrations that vividly depict the tale's characters. Readers can use these visual clues to build an initial or general impression, which then gains depth through the characters' words, actions, and choices. Students can also be encouraged to gather clues by noticing what people are wearing, what kind of talk is taking place, and what places are mentioned. These inferential tasks heighten students' awareness and promote their critical thinking.

A good starting point is to have students work in groups, individually, or with the whole class and make a list of the characters that appear in a fairy tale. These characters can then be labeled using criteria such as the following: (a) nasty or evil, (b) naïve or innocent, (c) clever or smart, (d) friendly or honest, (e) heroic or unheroic, (f) central or most important. Our students' impressions of characters are built up through the many different events encountered in a story. This cumulative process may help them to understand how the character changes. For example, since students probably already know *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, the main characters' names will evoke certain responses and feelings. Students can therefore make an initial list of their characteristics. Then, as they read and analyze the story they can notice how events shape character development and how the character's speech reveals personality.

This method allows students a sense of involvement with the characters while fostering their descriptive and interpretative skills. It also gives them a basis for devising their own protagonists and antagonists when producing a similar written piece (see suggested activities below). For example, they can describe an event that impacts a character's development or they can reveal a character's personality by creating a catchphrase or manner of speaking.

Comparing and explaining characters. After students develop their ability to analyze characters, they can begin to compare them. Some of the following questions can be applied to different characters in the same story:

1. What do they do?
2. What is done to them?
3. What do they say?
4. What do they think or feel?
5. What do they look like?
6. Where do they live?

Literature is rich with characters evoking complex responses—from the hero who we think is a bit too perfect to the bully whom we end up pitying. As students form their views, they can share them in a whole class discussion about a particular character and compare these views with other students' responses. In this fashion, students can learn to justify their views through reference to the text.

Setting. Some guidance should be offered so students realize how important the relations of time and space are in story development. For instance, if *Little Red Riding Hood* were set in a large city such as New York instead of in a forest, important changes would ensue: The protagonist would likely wear a leather jacket, sport a punk hairdo, and ride a motorcycle. As a result of these changes, the development of events and the function of the text would also change.

The choice of setting also influences the use of certain techniques such as personification and the inclusion of unreal characters like the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* or the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*. Another feature that contributes to the temporal setting of the story is the use of certain formulaic utterances such as “once upon a time,” “there was once a...,” and “they lived happily ever after.” These linguistic clues help the reader construct a fantasy image filled with pictures of castles, magic objects, princes and princesses, and faraway lands. Readers who are aware of such techniques are equipped with a repertoire of options that they can use when discussing contemporary issues as well as when creating traditional stories set in the past.

Message. The above-described analysis of characters, plot, and setting will enhance readers’ ability to interpret fairy tales and will eventually lead them to draw conclusions about the overall message of the story. In addition to interpreting the story’s moral, students can explore archetypal characters and what they represent as well as modern day concerns such as gender issues, power and control issues, and ethical values. For example, in *The Ugly Duckling* and *Beauty and the Beast*, the importance of beauty—valued highly in today’s world—is minimized, conveying a significant message to a society that tends to maximize it. The story’s imagery and symbolism provide another dimension for analysis. For instance, students can be led to discover that the apple that Snow White is offered stands for temptation and its consequences, and that her stepmother’s mirror represents madness and obsession.

Linguistic and structural features. Analysis of the story should not be restricted to the meaning of fairy tales, but should be extended to their structural properties as well. Questions can be addressed to the unraveling of the conventional form of the story or macrostructure (Dijk, 1980; Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). This term, macrostructure, refers to the organization of the global content, and hence of the global coherence, of a text. Detecting the themes and sub-themes and outlining the story schema contribute to the consolidation of the analytical and interpretative dimensions of this narrative genre.

To incorporate a more detailed linguistic perspective, teaching-learning objectives can include aspects related to word-formation, recurring syntactic patterns, cohesive markers, and formulaic language. An in-depth linguistic analysis should be emphasized throughout the study of the fairy tale. Such study can focus on noticing typical beginnings and endings, word repetition, word order, and the rhetorical features or macrostructures that are recurrent in this specific genre.

From Reading to Writing

By asking students to move beyond the text and use their imagination to create new storylines for their favorite characters, we open up unlimited writing possibilities. Below is a list of creative writing activities that we have assigned students to do after working with fairy tales. These activities are meant to engage students in writing about stimulating and challenging topics. The overall objective is to provide a framework for the development of the students' imagination, while emphasizing certain fundamental language points such as the use of pronouns and tenses in narratives. As a secondary objective, we also strive to have students broaden their active vocabulary and notice the importance of contextualization in storytelling.

Guided writing using vocabulary from a story. Students are given a list of lexical items, some belonging to the original story and others that have nothing to do with it. For instance, the following is a sample from *Little Red Riding Hood*: girl, woods, flowers, wolf, grandmother, flying saucer, moon. Students are then asked to write a story using all the words.

An upside-down story. Students are invited to rewrite any of their favorite stories by altering the temporal or spatial setting, or by changing the description of a character. For example, the main character from *Beauty and the Beast* is no longer a beautiful girl but an ugly witch, *Sleeping Beauty* is a yoga and meditation practitioner, or the *Three Little Pigs* live in an igloo. The wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* can be portrayed as kind and friendly and the little girl as mean and aggressive. Anything that alters the original story will provide great results.

Enlarging the story. Another possibility is to ask students to write a new ending for any of their favorite children's classics. Haven't you always wondered what happens after Cinderella marries the Prince? Or what happens to the dwarfs that helped Snow White?

A mosaic story. An alternative is to ask students to list some of the most outstanding characters from different fairy tales and, keeping their physical and psychological traits, create a new story that contains these characters. As a suggested activity for an end-of-term assignment, they can decide on a suitable situation, a conflict, and a resolution and involve the different characters they have analyzed throughout the term.

Poetry. Students can write a poem based on children's classic stories. For example, they can use the same content and rearrange it in the shape of a poem, limerick, or haiku.

Essay writing. Questions can be provided to solicit student opinions on topics from children's literature. For example, every classic story like *Snow White* or *The Princess and the Pea* has a happy ending in which all problems are resolved. A way to get students to explore this pattern in writing would be to pose the following question: What do you think of stories that hide reality, creating a world different than ours? Write an essay discussing this topic.

In the Appendix we have included selected writing samples that illustrate our students' creativity and hard work. These stories can be described as con-

temporary fiction rooted in students' own experiences. Although the student-produced stories have elements that can be found in fairy tales, the students have incorporated topical issues and other new ingredients, for example, an urban context that reflects their own representation of the world. Giving students this creative opportunity adds meaning and a sense of power to their lives and provides them with the enjoyment of writing and expressing a deep or even moral message. This type of writing activity can be a far more rewarding experience than simply writing a paper on an assigned topic, a chore that is often devoid of emotion. As we can see from the samples enclosed, after working with fairy tales students can give the stories a modern, surreal interpretation—thereby promoting their own deeper understanding of the story. At the same time, they acquire language structures, vocabulary that is appropriate to the genre, and idiomatic phrases.

Concluding Comments

In sum, fairy tales are an excellent vehicle for enhancing language and literacy development. Following the framework we propose, students first explore both the structure and content of the texts as a whole. They are then given the opportunity to demonstrate their world knowledge and creativity by providing a new story based on the now familiar tale. Because fairy tales are archetypal and anonymous, they particularly lend themselves to such reinterpretation and even reinvention without losing their original character. The final student products are always a great pleasure to read as they are inevitably the result of great effort and imagination. It is our hope that these ideas work as well in your EFL and ESL classes as they have in ours.

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Endnotes

¹ Sample was cooperatively written by upper-intermediate students: María Verónica Rojas, María Estela Aubone, and Adrián González. Reproduced with permission.

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Appendix

Sample Fairy Tales

Note: Students' lexical and conceptual choices have been kept to reproduce the authors' voices, however minimal editorial revision has been done. All student samples are used with permission.

Sample 1

THREE LITTLE PIGS

by María Estela Aubone

Once upon a time there were three little pigs who went out into the big world to build their homes and seek their fortunes.

The first little pig was very concerned about the environment, so he built himself a house of straw. Then off he went down the road to see how his brothers were getting along. As he walked, he played his flute, rehearsing the part he had to play at the church Christmas concert.

The second little pig also built an environmentally friendly house, not because he cared for Mother Nature but because he was very lazy. He had built a quick and easy house of sticks. Then he started sawing away at his violin, which he used to beg for money in the streets. He met his brother the flautist and off they danced and played down the road to see how their brother was getting along.

The third little pig constructed his house of bricks. He had not only built himself a splendid residence, but also a modern housing estate, for he was the laziest of the three brothers and wanted to live off the rental of his properties and had no regard for the conservationists who were fighting to stop the forest from being built on.

After spending a lovely evening together, the pigs returned to their own homes, just to find out that their little houses had been blown down by the wolf who lived in the woods nearby. They quickly ran to their brother's house expecting him to put them up. Instead, the third pig offered them two of his newly built cottages for rent. The homeless little pigs found themselves forced to accept and thus they became their brother's first tenants.

When the landlord pig came into his house, the wolf was waiting for him. They shook hands and according to what they had previously arranged, the hog paid the wolf for having blown down his brother's huts. Then he offered the hairy animal a job as managing director of his properties. The ex pork-eater accepted immediately and they stayed up the whole night celebrating the beginning of their new business relationship.

Sample 2

PINOCCHIO by Adriana Pérez

She was a beautiful girl named Amy, the first and only child of a young couple. Her mother had died when Amy was a baby. Her father remarried Mary when Amy was four. They lived in a small town with Mary's father, whose name was Gepetto. He was a very sweet old man and despite his age, he still worked as a carpenter.

Gepetto loved Amy as if she were his granddaughter. She was always sad and lonely because she didn't have any friends. So one day he made a marvelous puppet for her and Amy called it Pinocchio. But she wanted Pinocchio to be alive so that it could do everything she order it. Amy went to see a witch and he came to life through evil magic.

Although Amy looked like an innocent girl, she was bad. She hated everyone. Pinocchio really loved her and did everything she wanted. One day Amy told him that she wanted him to kill Gepetto because she hated Mary—her stepmother—and she wanted her to suffer. In fact, she was very jealous. She thought that her father had stopped loving her when he married Mary. But Pinocchio told her that she was wrong. He said that everybody loved her. Amy couldn't understand why she had those horrible feelings and she asked Pinocchio to help her change her behavior.

Sample 3

THE PRINCE'S DESTINY by Adrián González

Once upon a time there was a prince who was in love with a girl called Little Red Riding Hood. One day, she was so very lucky that she was invited to visit the Royal Castle.

The king told the prince that the girl should pass a test to marry him. She had to sleep over in the castle and feel a pea through one hundred mattresses. The prince decided to put his bowling ball under the mattresses so that Little Red Riding Hood could feel it. But he made a mistake: he told a friend about his plan. Unluckily, his friend was a very famous burglar who stole the ball before Little Red Riding Hood went to bed.

The following day, when the girl told the King that she had slept perfectly well, he kicked her out of the castle. The prince felt very sad, but Little Red Riding Hood was happy because then she was free from him and she could marry her secret love. She has loved somebody else for a long time.

Many years went by...Little Red Riding Hood married the wolf and the Prince had to marry an ugly girl who was able to feel the pea. Both couples lived happily for ever, but the Prince could never forget Little Red Riding Hood.

Sample 4

THE UGLY DUCKLING

by Graciela Gonzalorena

Once upon a time there was a female duck who was hatching out some eggs. At first she was happy, but then she realized that one of the eggs was bigger than the rest. A few days went by and all the baby ducks came out of their eggs. Mummy Duck was astonished. There was a really different duck! All the brothers Duck were waiting for a yellow sibling but It was completely different from its brothers. That's why Mummy Duck thought he wasn't her son. Every animal on the farm laughed at him and they called him The Ugly Duckling. Not even his mother liked him. She was so cruel and on several occasions she treated him like a servant.

When he grew up and was strong enough, he decided to do something about that way this situation. One night he was walking alone near the lake thinking about what to do with his life when a cow shouted: "The Ugly Duckling is here!" Ugly Duckling turned around and shot the cow in the head. Consequently he was sent to prison. But no animal, not even his mother, was brave enough to call him that way. The Ugly Duckling is now famous for his book "How to raise your self-esteem" and signs copies from jail.

Sample 5

NEVER TRUST A SWEET FACE

by María Verónica Rojas

Cinderella was a beautiful girl who lived with her stepmother and stepsisters. At first, they forced her to do all the housework, but she had such a strong character that she told them it wasn't fair. As time passed, the stepmother and stepsisters became kind and gentle and helped Cinderella.

One day, the prince sent invitations for a dance to all the girls in the kingdom. The stepsisters bought dresses, jewels and perfumes, but poor Cinderella couldn't afford them. When they left she started crying in the kitchen. All of a sudden, a fairy godmother appeared and turned

Cinderella into a Princess. She also turned a pumpkin into a splendid carriage. But the fairy godmother advised Cinderella to return home before midnight because at that time the spell would break.

When Cinderella arrived at the dance, everyone stared at her wondering who she was. The Prince felt she was the girl he had been looking for. Cinderella was interested in the Prince's richness, not in him. As it was nearly midnight, she started running and lost one shoe. The Prince found it and decided that the girl who fitted it would be his wife. At last, he found Cinderella. They got married and after a month she killed him. She has sent some postcards from Cancun where she is on her second honeymoon.

Sample 6

THE OVER-SLEEPING BEAUTY

by María Angélica Oyarzo

Some years ago in England, there were a king and a queen who loved each other but didn't have a child. So they decided to adopt one on the condition that if they did that, they would lose everything they owned. A few months later, they were living in a small house near the palace. The little child came and it was a beautiful girl. They called her Marianne, and her parents were very happy! She grew up very quickly and her parents loved her a lot. But Marianne had a problem: she loved to sleep. She spent all day and every day in her room, sleeping and dreaming of a young man who used to tell her beautiful words. She didn't like to study, play with other children or watch TV. She just wanted to sleep and nothing else. What's more, she never got out of her room.

When Marianne was fifteen, her parents came into her room and invited her to a party, but she immediately refused. They forced her to go with them. She was very beautiful and all young men looked at her. But she was only thinking about a place to relax, and as soon as she found a comfortable sofa, she fell asleep.

As Marianne was dreaming about a good-looking man who was telling her romantic words and kissing her, something unexpected happened. Someone started to pull her arm and was trying to wake her up. When she opened her eyes, she saw a very young man by her side. He eventually invited her to dance. She agreed and it was love at first sight. They couldn't avoid falling in love. Her dream came true and a few months later, they got married. But it was only a dream. Everything had only happened in her imagination.