



## Folktales and the Oral Tradition in the Grade 9 EFAL Classroom

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### Abstract

Folktales stem from the oral tradition passed down over generations by the people who recounted them. These tales form part of the prescribed syllabus, CAPS, in South Africa specifically for Grade 9 English First Additional (EFAL) learners. The study explored the perceptions of folktales in EFAL classrooms by 9 learners and 9 teachers. It was a qualitative study using purposeful sampling and an interpretivist research paradigm. The theoretical lens employed was Vygotsky's constructivist theory. The study found that there are conflicting views on learning African folktales in English. The former Apartheid system's impact has not completely been forgotten and there were still negative attitudes towards English as the language of the oppressor. Yet participants claimed that folktales needed to be revived and teachers must use narratives closer to their home and culture. Learners were positive towards learning folktales but there were those who deemed the stories as too simple to study in Grade 9. Teacher participants however revealed that learners benefit in that they learn new vocabulary and about other cultures and life.

### Keywords:

*English folktales, Grade 9 learners, perception, South Africa*

## INTRODUCTION

Folktales are important since they are linked with the teaching of morals and preservation of culture. In bygone days, folktales, and fairytales as part of folklore (Gunner, 2021), formed an integral part of education in the home environment. It is around the fireplace that grandmothers and grandfathers shared these tales with their children and grandchildren. Folklore is still enjoyed but need some transformation to adjust the Eurocentric values and settings for the diverse cultural groups to understand and enjoy them (Livingstone, 2018). Folktales, especially African folktales have become less prominent and have attracted less attention recently, since they are deemed as literature only for the older generation and those who are not so well educated (Mech, 2015).

The reason why folktales as narratives are appropriate for learners to use as reading texts in education are summarised by Birhanet et al. (2021) as follows. Folktales are entertaining stories They contain simple plots children can follow. They serve as the foundation for interpreting all literature. They help children to understand their world, and to identify with the characters. In addition, they appeal to children's sense of justice and comfort them. Furthermore, they teach a moral lesson and promise that perseverance and goodness are rewarded. Folktales stimulate children's imagination to facilitate problem solving.

Govender and Hugo (2020) found in their study that the literacy levels of South African learners are poor. Reading to learn is critical and the fact that learning is socially impacted highlights the value of using folktales to teach reading and moreover writing in English. Focusing on learner support can influence learners' academic achievement and for teachers to assist the learner effectively they must be informed about their attitudes to make the most of the reading opportunity in class (Milin, 2015). The Internet provides examples of folklore, and selection and evaluation of stories remain a challenge (Haase, 2016).

The Grade 9 learners in South African schools must engage with folklore as part of the syllabus (DoBE, 2012, 2022). Because of this prescription, Grade 9 teachers were involved in the study. Teachers are engaged in teaching folktales and they in their engagement of teaching learners to develop, follow constructivist teaching and support (Vygotsky, 1978), sharing information regarding the topic with the learner in order to grow and develop. The problem that they however encounter is that learners deem folktales as less important and they are reluctant to engage in role-play. Stroud (2013) found in his study that humour is created using stories when teaching, but that not all learners are in favour of humorous stories as they are not all extroverts. Using folktales is often deemed as a humorous way to learn English, but there is a downside to the incorporation of these stories in the English classroom because of differences in personality which impacts the willingness to participate.

The study sought to investigate teacher and learner perspectives on studying English folktales in the EFAL classroom when engaging with this genre. The researchers aimed to investigate whether folktales were viewed as too simple and humorous a genre to involve secondary school learners and whether using them to enhance learning English was supported. The viewpoints on research regarding teaching folklore (Wang & Eamoraphan, 2022) underscoring the importance of taking into consideration the cultural context, were researched but the gaps that were identified, revealed little has been done on reviewing the use of folktales in the Grade 9 classroom.

Another salient aspect that surfaced was the fact that the learners who participated in this study were English second language speakers. English is a well-known global language that is frequently used as a primary language for education in almost every country. Teaching regional languages, on the other hand, can help children become part of the society and culture in which they are born and raised. It is believed that learning English is beneficial because of its global impact (Miller, 2022). Miller (ibid.) holds that if children's primary language for education is English, they have an advantage when studying abroad. Moreover, if children learn English, they can communicate with other people all over the globe. The impact of Apartheid still poses challenges to teachers because of language attitudes, and a lack of resources especially among African learners (Pillay, 2017).

The research questions that guided the study were: (1) Which factors influence learners' and teachers' perspectives on folklore when teaching in English in the EFAL Grade 9 classroom? (2) What can be done to change the teachers' and learners' perspectives on engaging with folklore as part of their language development?

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

A research design is a strategy or plan used to select a certain set of participants to gather data that will be used throughout a study and the subsequent data analysis, (Maree, 2020). In this study, a qualitative research approach, which is based on constructivism (Pardede, 2019), in the form of case study was used, which fits well with the goal of eliciting real-life participant reactions. A case study design afforded the researchers the opportunity to collect various points of view to better understand the research issue (Niewenhuizen, 2020). A measuring device is referred to as a research instrument (survey, tests, and rubrics) and focus group interviews were used. A tape recorder was used during the interviewing process and the data were transcribed. Participants participated voluntarily and anonymously and could withdraw at any time they wished to. Ethical clearance was also granted by the relevant university. The participants resided in Soshanguve Gauteng and were all Grade 9 learners and teachers.

### **Procedures**

A qualitative research technique involves a scientific method to gather non-numerical data (Niewenhuis, 2020). It focuses on subjective responses of study participants to open-ended questions. An exploratory study was done to gain a better understanding of the underlying reasons, points of view and motivations expressed by the selected participants. Qualitative research can also reveal trends in thought and views to go further into a topic. Geyer (2021) states that during the focus group interviews, the advantage is that they enable the researcher to collect data faster than personal interviews (Niewenhuis, 2020). Participants were Grade 9 learners and teachers. The sampling method was chosen to reinforce the transferability of the findings. This study investigated the perceptions of the selected participants to the incorporation of folklore focusing on folktales as part of the EFAL syllabus. Eighteen (18) participants embracing 9 learners and 9 teachers, participated in focus group interviews and revealed their perceptions about teaching and studying folklore in English as a prescribed genre in the Grade 9 EFAL classroom (qualitative). The researcher adhered to COVID-19 rules of social distancing and they wore masks.

The analysis of data is central to the processes of a study. Niewenhuis (2020) suggests that themes must be extracted from participant narratives relevant to the study. Coding is the process of identifying themes and assigning labels (codes). Qualitative data are arrived at because of a specific researcher's interaction with the participants and form part of answering research questions. Themes are useful tools for assisting in developing data narrative (Niewenhuis, 2020). Themes were identified and a discussion on the findings follows next.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Perceptions on folktales as part of listening and teaching English**

Teachers in public schools provided most of the input regarding Grade 9 L2 English learners on listening to an English text. As required by the DoBE (2022), the teacher taught English and assessed a listening exercise based on folktales. It was clear that learners experienced difficulty to understand many of the words and to decipher the foreign English sounds, which caused them to perform poorly in the story writing test. The teachers were forced to repeat the stories, and many were perplexed as to what it was all about. None of the teachers spoke English as their first language; the learners struggled to understand the English vocabulary in the narrative even though simple words are used. Teacher PUSBT3m said:

*The listening evaluation assignment is the most challenging to accomplish. Students are affected by their inability to pronounce the sounds and connect them to meaning as they struggle. It is still challenging for children to express their responses, despite my best efforts to read slowly and with the appropriate tone and pitch. While it might seem that learners would easily understand folklore, they are not entirely convinced.*

Teachers in the three participating schools reported that the listening exam was also difficult, because it is impossible for learners to recall the information they need to present as answers to questions if they cannot ask the teacher to repeat what was read in the story. All the teachers found the listening test to be a difficult task, because of diction and pronunciation, as learners battled to follow.

It was also demonstrated that, due to class size, particularly in these public institutions, teachers continued to rely on traditional teaching methods such as direct instruction. Learners expressed concern about completing narration in front of the class, because they have been teased by other learners for their incorrect and unusual pronunciation at times, because they normally speak their mother tongue, but others from better backgrounds appear to be interested. They admitted to watching television to learn new words, focusing on pronunciation and consulting dictionaries to understand the meaning of the terms. Their most influential contact with the spoken word came from television. It is lamentable that they could not fully hone their narration skills due to time constraints and a lack of English-speaking friends; they battled to use English.

PUSAT3m said:

*There are learners who are so scared to speak in front of the class because they are afraid to be humiliated by the other learners. They do not speak much outside the classroom and that is maybe a reason why they struggle to read aloud and participate in oral presentations in class. They really need assistance.*

Well-planned teaching techniques can assist learners in learning to tell stories and dealing with African folktales in English. Each teaching technique must be supported by

appropriate teaching materials. A variety of narrating techniques were used by teachers. According to the teacher participants, individual silent speaking is very useful, especially in small classrooms where each learner can focus and be given the opportunity to speak. Individual reading, according to PUSCT3f, is a method of teaching learners the responsibility of focusing on the story on their own. It is possible to hear if the learners can utter the words and how they pronounce them while completing unprepared narration. It is then simple to determine who requires additional assistance. However, the number of learners in each class makes it difficult. This finding is supported by West and Meier (2020:1) who assert that the large numbers of learners per class poses a challenge when it comes to teaching and learner participation.

The teacher frequently allows learners to complete written assessment work based on folktales while others perform unprepared and prepared narration which they receive marks for. Another teacher at school C (PUSCT4f) said:

*When learners present, I take time to listen to their words to check if they pronounce them correctly. I also check the confidence when they are narrating. I use scanning and give story clues, involve prediction and inference, while they are looking at the pictures. I teach them phonetics to help them understand the difficult words. Learners are not so readily exposed to English reading material at home and it remains the responsibility of the teacher at the end of the day.*

Learners who were highly motivated and enjoyed reading used narration more frequently and performed better when telling the folktales. According to PUSAT3m:

*Reading what they are most familiar with and interested in will drive learners. Learners in secondary school prefer short, exciting stories. Boys particularly like stories with an element of adventure, while girls like stories with female heroines that are more sensitive and romantic. Learners will feel more driven if they are excited about the material and are interested in it. They must be able to relate to the narrative.*

It was also claimed that students found it difficult to complete the listening test. Poor performance in listening tests was attributed to the readers' unusual understanding of pronunciation of words and their inability to hear and interpret all the English sounds. More vocabulary problems arose as they fell behind in interpreting and synthesising when they could not understand the words. The issue of learners learning at their own pace posed a problem, because everyone should be able to follow at the same pace for everyone to hear the same story. Nadhira and Warne (2021) assert that listening skills are regarded as neglected skills in English second language learning. They are of the view that even though vocabulary branching is important, listening to sounds is part of acquiring the second language. They underscore that the difference in culture and learning new difficult words can also cause problems for learners in their attempt to master the second language, which underscores the incorporation of folktales in an effective way, accommodating cultural aspects.

### **Perceptions on incorporating African folktales in the English reading class**

Mangalik and Upa (2018) identify the value of understanding students' psychological perceptions of folktales, They are of the view that using folktales in the language class can facilitate concentration and stimulate interest in learning the English language. They are of the view that readers' imagination can be stimulated and they identify the creative

value added to the learning process when involving folktales and taking note of learners' reactions towards folktales. Furthermore, Sayeef (2019) is of the opinion that learners can be exposed to cultural experiences and they can also benefit by studying language patterns and words. He is of the view that learners can be informed about life lessons and values and can be taught how to treat jealousy, hatred death and love. He regards folktales as indeed appropriate reading material for high school learners. Perceptions of reading material are critical in the reception and application of folktales as part of prescribed folklore. Some learners (PUSAL1m and PUSBL1f) were of the view that the folktales tales are too simple and belong to the primary school, despite the fact that teachers noted that they had difficulty in understanding the vocabulary. Conversely it was found that there was a learner (PUSBL2m) who recognised the advantage of learning English folklore at school, because it is part of his culture and it tells more where his people came from and what happened years ago for example, he referred to *The three brothers and the pot of porridge* (Okunade, 2017). This story is about three brothers that had been walking for over a day and it was getting dark. They wanted a safe location to sleep for the night, away from roaming creatures of the night. This story reveals that the ancestors could walk long distances without using any transport and resilience is learnt.

Some learners (PUSAL1m and PUSBL1f), viewed studying folktales as a disadvantage because they opined that they were wasting their time. They were of the view that folktales and folklore are old-fashioned, childlike, and meant for very young children in the pre-primary and primary school. The topics were also too simple for them. PUSAL1m said:

*We live in a modern world and these stories are really not relatable. Technology has changed the way we think and we enjoy fast action-packed stories.*

The participating public schools are in the township of Soshanguve where they consider culture as essential. Many learners come from large families where grannies tell folktales. So, this is an advantage to the learners when it comes to being informed about African folktales in English regardless of their modern approach of needing modern stories using technology.

Learner PUSAL1m said:

*My parents are deeply rooted in traditional storytelling and adore Sepedi performances. They cannot read or write but enjoy listening to folktales and enjoy telling stories. They are fiercely committed to their language. It is difficult if your parents do not support you. We also do not like to do role-play as we are shy and some laugh at the ones performing. We feel embarrassed to participate in the fairy tales as the stories are too childish.*

PUSBL2m said:

*I do not have knowledge of many English folktales. We do not speak English since we do not have any English friends and we only do so when we go shopping or visit the mall. Even individuals at the mall in Soshanguve speak African languages, thus possibilities to practise English words and grammar in Soshanguve are limited.*

Learning from peers did not help public school learners much when it came to orals when dealing with folktales, since learners spoke more readily in their native tongues.

They shared storybooks and they were unable to understand the story after reading it in English. PUSBT3f said:

*We focus on engaging learners in writing the high register words connected with the theme on the board, but due to the large number of learners it is not possible to do proper word attack skills as part of reading in groups because of the noise of 50 plus learners when communicating. Fewer learners per class would help to interpret after reading; learners would know the English words better and even how to pronounce them.*

PUSAT1m posited:

*The Department of Education has chosen the storybooks for Grade 9 learners. Since many students merely show up for class without their storybooks, I also create photocopies of the stories. Since they cannot follow in their storybooks, it is particularly frustrating when learners show boredom. I like giving learners the opportunity to role-play while I interpret the text by concentrating on what I read. I like role-play because it allows us to use media to make the lesson more interesting and it allows learners to bring something from home to wear and portray during role-playing.*

PUSAT1m posited that:

*The availability of reading materials for learners to recognise key spelling words in novel contexts is strongly related to teaching reading to students. We urgently need assistance with our infrastructure if we are to receive the librarian and school library's support. Reading aloud enables reading and listening.*

PUSBT3f reported that the sentence structure and level of vocabulary were clearly problematic. Teachers used to believe that if learners learned the vocabulary when reading, it would be easier for them to express themselves properly and meaningfully because word order is easy to modify and teach. Inserting pronouns where they should not be used should be avoided. This could be remedied by regularly reading aloud from narrative books aimed at the learners' level.

PUSBT3f said:

*Language is very important because we use languages in various areas such as reading boards and studying other learning areas. It is an accomplished fact that when learners read their vocabulary will help increase knowledge of everything. Learners write answers to questions and summarise folktales.*

Teachers at these public schools reported that students from affluent families enjoyed reading and writing as well. They participated and volunteered. They demonstrated this by reading the folktale aloud and at times, dramatising it. The more engaged and enthusiastic the teacher appeared, the more positive attitudes and motivation were expressed. Teachers, on the other hand, stated that they were fully aware that learning English could provide learners with more opportunities. Learning English folklore stimulates learners' interest by expanding their vocabulary.

PUSCT5m said:

*We must inform the learners of the importance of acquiring English and English reading techniques in order to combat poverty in rural areas. Since most of their subjects are in English, English is the language that can matter and aid their education. The mindset of language learners must change, as well as their perception of contemporary life and the necessity of education if they are to become literate.*

Reading texts incorporating folktales are used to teach a variety of reading skills. There are various teaching methods such as shared reading (stories), guided reading and reading aloud texts must all be evaluated. These opportunities should be planned and documented. Reading necessitates listening skills, but only as part of the narration (reading and speaking). The programme includes on-going instruction. Learners could also hone their writing skills by writing answers to questions on the stories and by summarising stories (DoBE, 2017:21).

### **Background knowledge as influential factor influencing perceptions of folktales**

The fundamental building block of all human learning and education is the story. In indigenous cultures, storytelling is a technique that supports communities and validates indigenous peoples' experiences and epistemologies. English is a subject in school that contains a portion of the oral tradition to demonstrate how important it is. The DoBE (2012, 2022) ensures that orals from oral traditions are taught in schools. Storytelling enables indigenous people to communicate their experiences in indigenous languages and it promotes partnerships and the exchange of indigenous knowledge and customs (Minogiizhigokwe, 2011:10).

Indigenous people value storytelling, oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledge and cultural resources for evaluating contemporary events and indigenous understanding in ways that are consistent with traditional worldviews and cosmologies (Minogiizhigokwe, 2011:11). As a result, indigenous epistemologies and research methods prioritise narratives.

The story is a basic foundation of all human learning and teaching. Storytelling is an introduction to indigenous cultures and sustains communities and validates the experiences and epistemologies of indigenous people. Storytelling provides opportunities to express the experiences of indigenous peoples in indigenous languages and nurtures relationships and the sharing of indigenous knowledges and cultures. Storytelling is also an important approach to research among indigenous scholars (Suryawan, Mantra & Wiadnya, 2018). Participants revealed that they enjoyed folktales especially when these relate to their own African culture. They said that fairy tales are well-known but that they felt more positive about the reading and listening lesson when folktales were used. It also emerged that extroverts were more positive to participate in orals and role-play.

PUSLB1f said:

*We as learners in public schools appreciate conversing in our own language. It is the most important human right to us. English is not even widely known by all of us and we do not use it extensively at home. We are thus also not so interested in English folklore as it is written in English, a language that is not close to our language used at home.*



PUSLB1f commented:

*During FAL (English), we use English language and the narrative is in English, which helps us grasp this language. We are not allowed to use our home language.*

There was a discrepancy in the popularity of folktales since teachers were more positive than the learners who were strongly influenced by their parents and their preference for their own languages.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that teachers must be trained regarding the teaching of folktales. They must be assisted with advice on how to incorporate folktales in their classes. Attention must be given to illiterate parents since in the modern era all South African citizens must be able to read and write. Literacy campaigns can assist in facilitating this approach. Furthermore, learners must be sensitised on cultural roots and how to be accommodating and tolerant of other cultures. They must learn to appreciate their own traditions and how to participate enthusiastically in the classroom especially during lessons dealing with folktales.

## CONCLUSION

The study underscored the value of storytelling as form of entertainment and a strategy to engage learners in the English classroom. Folktales were reported by some to be too simple to use in education, yet folktales provide a deeper understanding in life and can even assist in learning and teaching values that are still useful in modern times, since they are regarded as lucid and explanatory, and stimulate creativity in children (Mech, 2015). Furthermore, it was mentioned that learners do learn new vocabulary even though the folktales are simple and that they could indeed benefit from them

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