

English Folk Literature and Nursery Rhymes: authentic materials for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language¹

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"The simplicity and magic of the fairytale have an appeal for all ages. The interplay of the visible and unseen worlds captures the imagination. Who is to say where reality begins or ends?"
M. McGarry.

Introduction

Not long ago, the editor of a Spanish newspaper commented that if a citizen of the 19th Century had the opportunity of coming back to the world, he wouldn't be able to recognize it, unless he visited a classroom in one of our schools. There he could find the same distribution of spaces as in his time; equivalent ways of teacher-student relationship; similar equipment: blackboards, books, exercise books and so on.

Still I'm not very sure if the citizen would be able to recognize some -only some- of the English language classes of today. There we can observe a teaching/learning model openly different from traditional approaches: text books have been substituted for authentic materials; students move around the classroom organizing their knowledge in an autonomous way; teachers have left their directive role, and base teaching on communicative principles; videos and computers form part of the equipment.

Luckily a new teaching concept, fostered with technological and computing aids, is getting into some schools. Slowly, and by the hand of what seems to be an important Education Reform, the myth of changes that are taking place at the end of the century, seems to be beginning to expand into the Spanish education field. Nevertheless, we all know that there is a long way to go and teacher's thoughts resist change.

Education and language teaching materials.

Although the paradigm learning/teaching that the Spanish Education Reform points out, is familiar to many foreign language teachers as far as teacher and

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students roles and methodology is concerned, it is nonetheless true to say that many of those teachers, especially Secondary School teachers, have never assumed their educational role. Stuck in the tradition of language teacher instructors at pre-university levels, engaged in transmitting linguistic knowledge to the students with a utilitarian and preparatory aim, teachers often forgot their real role as educators, responsible for the global education of the student. In this sense the teaching of foreign languages in Spain has followed the classic canons of the subject teaching specialists, and this has often created isolated compartments of knowledge in the minds of the learners which, in fact, has not helped the students in their general learning process.

In foreign language teaching we miss the opportunity of using the language for teaching other subjects of the school curriculum, and what is worse still, we can find examples where the linguistic input is being given empty of any sort of educational content or even of socio-cultural content, because there are teachers who still think that it is possible to learn a language without culture .

Repetition of words and sentences of the audio-lingual methodologies were condemned because they didn't bring communication or originate learning and sentences like "This is my tailor. My tailor is rich", were ridiculized. Structural syllabuses have been replaced by notional-functional ones that intend to teach students how to ask for information, how to buy a shirt or exchange it, how to ask and answer for directions, etc. in order to learn the language. More recent approaches have liberated teachers and students of the dictatorship of the linguistic syllabus and are following task-based approaches because they have realized that learning a foreign language is a creative process, and that interaction determines communication. Nevertheless, when choosing teaching materials teachers frequently happen to forget that they "are educators as well as subject specialists and therefore have a measure of responsibility for the development of the whole child, not just his/her language skills," as Tricia Hedge puts it.

Our aim is to present here the kind of teaching materials which whilst being "authentic" -as recommended by experts on the teaching of foreign languages : "Optimal input is that which comes as a result of negotiation work as opposed to that input which is only simplified".(Faerch & G. Kasper 1986: 262)- are also accessible to students because, quoting Alan Maley, "We hold that learners are more likely to acquire the language if they are exposed to authentic samples of it. We recognize the danger, however of making a god of "authenticity". Inputs would therefore usually be truly authentic (but accessible) or "modified authentic", that is preserving the linguistic properties of authentic texts" (A. Maley,

1986:93). The material we are talking about is that collected from the oral tradition which, by nature, is authentic and accessible, having also other linguistic, educational, motivational and affective characteristics, very pertinent from a didactic point of view.

Folk stories and Nursery Rhymes

In English Folk Literature and Nursery Rhymes, as happens in other languages, there are different types of prose and verse compositions. These pieces of writing, because they have been passed from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation keep lexical, rhythmic, and discourse peculiarities that help us to memorize the message. In addition, they are theme recurrent.

Among these compositions, there are some which are really interesting for the teaching of English, such as riddles, jokes, legends and tales. We may divide the latter into different groups:

Fairy tales:

They deal with fabulous worlds. Some well known titles are "Little Red Riding Hood", "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs",...According to Propp's study: *Morfología del Cuento*, the characters always follow the same sequence of functions. There are variants of these tales throughout Europe and they are popular with children of different nationalities, no matter if the tales have a British origin, like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and "Jack and the Beanstalk", or if they come from another country. The fact of presenting a well-known theme, having repetitions, anaphoras, lexical chains, grammar and lexical parallelisms, the same beginning and end, etc., helps the understanding of the message because the learner is familiar with the type of discourse. Furthermore, the topic has appeal for children and grown-ups. For the former because they are always fond of fairy tales and for the latter because of the affective aspect which motivates the learner to analyze and get new messages out of them.

Tales about Elves and other fabulous beings from the British Isles mythology:

In those tales we can find different types of fabulous characters, like the Irish fairies, Brownies, Leprechauns, Merrows, Seals, Kelpies, Sea-serpents and Dragons. Through these stories we come into the British and Celtic mythological world, some of whose characters appear in Asturian mythology under the name of "xanas" and "trasgus".

Tales like "The Loch Ness Kelpie", which deals with the popular Scottish

monster or “Mester Stoorworn”², and tells of the birth on the Islands Orkney and Shetland, and Iceland where “the fire that Assipale (the protagonist) kindled still burns under the mountains”, offer the opportunity of bringing into the classroom British geography and myths in a contextualized way.

Tales about Witches and Wizards.

In British literature and folklore there are constant references to the supernatural power of the witches (Hallowe’en, Macbeth, Mother Shipton...). Tales like “Witches at Hallowe’en” or “The Hare’s Parliament”³ deal with the activities of these characters and their role in English culture.

Tales about witches and wizards offer the chance of dealing with sexism, because while the witch’ role is pejorative -witches are evil, have business with The Devil, etc.- and society condemns them to burn at the stake, the wizard’s role is positive -they are magicians and pseudoscientists.

Tales about Ghosts and “Blackdogs”:

We must explain that according to tradition, “blackdogs” can be ghosts of human and of dogs that have returned to the earth to purge their sins. This myth is similar to the Galician’s one called “La Santa compañía”. There are many different tales about ghosts in the British Isles, so to make a selection of them is an almost impossible task. We all know that any self respecting castle or ancient house has their own ghost, especially those to be found in the dark, foggy, northern realms.

Jocular Tales:

They narrate conflicts between their characters, and as a matter of fact it is always the stronger, the richer or the more powerful one who is being ridiculed. These are tales that deal with historical characters like “King Edward and the Salad”, and others whose theme is modern, as occurs in “The Best Way to Die”, which shows the worries of three old men nearing their end: While the younger wants to die in a car accident at 70 miles an hour, the second prefers to finish in a sputnik during a space trip, and the oldest, who is 96, says: I’d like to be shot by a jealous husband.” From a didactic point of view, these tales as well as the jokes, offer the

² Both tales are in R. Manning-Sanders (1982): *Scottish Folk Tales*.

³ In K. M. Briggs (1973): *British Folk Tales and Legends: A Sampler*.

opportunity of presenting the students with examples of English humour⁴ and of showing them that communication in a language is impossible if we don't know its socio-cultural code.

Legends:

They have special educational interest because they present historical and mythical characters and geographic accounts. There are legends about King Arthur, Captain Drake, "town and gown" quarrels in Oxford, and the origin of different mountains and cliffs, to mention but a few.

A considerable amount of the popular literature comes in verse and can be read in any children's nursery rhymes anthology. It includes:

- ▶ old sayings and spells, such as "apple a day keeps doctors away" and "if you see a pin pick it up and it'll give you good luck".
- ▶ Rhymes for singing and entertaining, among which are included nursery rhymes, children's songs, tongue-twisters, never-ending tales, nonsense rhymes, absurd rhymes, and limericks -popular compositions of five verses in which the protagonist's fate is tied to the sound of his/her name or to the place of origin-⁵. Limericks have been popularized by the poet Edward Lear in five line verses, as in the following example:

"There was an old person of Harrow
Who bought a mahogany barrow,
For he said to his wife,
You are the joy of my life!
And I'll wheel you all day in this barrow!"

- ▶ Rhymes for playing: riddles, counting-out-rhymes and playing rhymes (clapping, ball, skipping, ring-a-roses, catch,...)

⁴ An example of these tales could be "Dutch Courage" (in K. M. Briggs, op. cit.): "A man had been drinking after dinner, and he was sitting at the table with a few drops of whisky still at the bottom of his glass. Presently a mouse climbed up the table-cloth and ran about the table picking up crumbs. It climbed up the glass, fell inside, and sucked up all the whisky. Then it began rushing round the glass until it knocked it over, stood up unsteadily on its hind legs, brushed back its whiskers, clenched its front paws, and said, wher'sh that damned cat!"

⁵ See the following example:

"There was an old woman in Spain,/ To be civil went much 'gainst her grain;/ Yet she danced a fandango/
with General Fernando,/ this whimsical woman of Spain.

In all this rhymed material we can see the collective memory of the British people, from old traditions and beliefs to superstitions that still persist today. It keeps up greatly appreciated pieces of the English humor, and sense of nonsense. Through them we can also teach the pronunciation and the rhythm of the English language.

Educational, motivating and linguistic functions

Throughout literature we can see plenty of references to the value of folklore in the education of children. Plato in the Republic already recommended starting children's education by giving them fables instead of a rationalized teaching. For the psychologist B. Bettelheim, tales are a sort of natural autotherapy, elaborated through the history of humankind and have been useful for trivializing anxiety and the internal conflicts of personality.

The educational functions that folk literature and nursery rhymes can develop in the teaching of English are different, although closely interrelated.

Let us name first its *socializing and motivating function*, which is due to the entertaining characteristics of this type of material. In every day life a child starts its socialization through games. Helped by the magic words of playing rhymes like the counting-out one that says: "Cinderella, Cinderella, / went to the ball, / walked through the door, / fell through the floor, / and OUT she went", the child accepts roles and rules. Accepting the rules he begins to recognize the rights of his play-mates and, in this way, he learns the rules of socialization.

Motivation and interaction are important ingredients in the process of acquiring a language. According to Stevick, to learn a language the subject must develop cognitive and affective responses. Such responses can be initiated through a playing dynamic, reciting the corresponding rhymes, through simulations of fairy tales, through the cognitive dynamic that is required to be able to answer riddles, and through the laughter provoked by nonsense rhymes, limericks, and tongue-twisters.

Folklore can also develop an *informative and transmitting function* of knowledge, and socio-cultural and moral values. The term tale, derived from to tell, is the word that best defines the concept. We must keep in mind that folk narration was born in a preliterate society that transmitted their knowledge, values and culture orally. Even some nursery rhymes used to narrate historical events, although the remains left today look as nonsensical, due to linguistic corruptions and to the loss of context, as in the popular one that follows:

“Ring a ring of roses
A pocket full o posies,
A-tishoo!, A-tishoo
We all fall down”.

According to Opie, this playing rhyme has remains of an old song that narrated the symptoms and treatment of the Great Plague, and the fate of the infected people. This transmitting function has been possible due to the type of discourse and the squemata of popular texts. Repetitions, lexical chains, rythm, rhyme and so on, are natural nemotecnic means which are excellent when working with children who still can use relational memory.

Folk literature tells about the thought and believes of a community: myths, superstitions, spells, moral, gods and so on. It includes much of the socio-cultural code which is necessary to know in order to be able to communicate correctly. For instance: a Spaniard would have a hard job interpreting a birthday card with a black cat on it. The rhyme “black cat, black cat, bring me luck / if you don’t I’ll tear you up”, often recited by English children, could help the student to learn that symbols in both cultures- Spanish and English- can have different messages. The same applies for many other rhymes that deal with spells. Through tales, legends and rhymes we can also get to know concepts related to geography, history and British life.

Folk narrative and nursery rhymes may also have a stimulating function of *intellectual, artistic, literary and linguistic faculties*. Novelists and poets drank in folklore and some recognize that it was the flame that fed their creativity. García Lorca, Alberti, Casona, Ted Huges, C. S. Lewis, etc., restarted “a tale began in other days.....where echoes live in memory yet”, as Lewis Carroll says in the preface to “Through the Looking Glass”. Elizabeth Cook, an expert on children literature, affirms that the world of the epic, romance and allegory “may be hard for one who never heard fairy tales as a child”.

From a linguistic point of view, the use of this material in the English Foreign language class not only helps to teach many aspects of the socio-cultural code, as we have already said, and to practise the use of the language through communicative activities, but may also help inpronunciation, grammar and lexic teaching revisions.

Not only tongue- twisters, like the well known “Robert Rowley rolled a round roll round...”, can be useful for practising pronunciation -any rhyme is good for that aim. For instance, we can practice some difficult phonemes for Spanish speakers, such as, /i:/; /I:/; /e:/; /ə:/; /a:/; /v:/; /n:/; and /z/ with the following rhymed riddle:

“As I was going to St. Ives,
I met a man with seven wives,
Each wife had seven sacks,
Each sack had seven cats,
Each cat had seven kits,
Kits, cats, sacks and wives,
How many were going to St. Ives?”

As for rhythm “the students who had done rhymes with me read the story with fairly good intonation,...”, says Lakshmi Desai, after his research done with adult beginners and false beginners.

Rhymes, tales and riddles, because of the repetitions, lexical chains and parallelisms they have, are good for memorizing terms in a natural way. We must remember that according to M. Sharwood Smith (1986:251) “one of the ways in which data becomes robust is via frequency”.

The discourse of popular tales is simple and precise, and so are the functions of their characters. The title already advances the theme, eg.: “Drake and the Armada”, “The boy who was never hungry”,.....The action is often unique and the characters are limited in their functions. Generally they are antithetical, good or bad, beautiful or horrible, etc. The dialogues are short and they bring dynamism to communication. The argument is plain, with a beginning and an end similar or even identical in the case of fairy tales: “Once upon a time....”, “and they lived happy ever after”. This sort of quick and peaceful ends fulfill the expectations of the reader or listener.

All the structural, cultural and rhetorical peculiarities of the tales are familiar to the student, as well as the repeated topics, and this brings security to the learner, stimulating him to make hypothesis of meanings, and focus the comprehension of a text from a holistic perspective, as we do in our mother tongue. We could say that folk tales are, by nature, “simple accounts” and not “simplified versions”, using Henry Widdowson’s terminology.

How to use Folk Literature in EFL classes

Our epistemologic conception of a foreign language, as a natural way of transmitting contents, building up knowledge and modifying human thought, and the belief that a language is acquired in situations of real communication or natural use of it, drives us to organize this teaching material throughout contexts of use, task realizations or any other communicative activity.

Experiences in the field tell us that if the folk material is inserted in the teaching syllabus, correlative to the festival calendar of the year or in close

relation with themes treated in the school curriculum, the student's motivation rises and significative learning seems to take place, due to the fact that the natural scenery of the student is integrated in the school instructional world. An interdiciplinary experience organized around Shrove Tuesday in a Secondary School in Asturias was a very possitive experience for teachers and students. In English classes we worked on the topic as well, and students had the opportunity of dealing with fancy dress, compare the Spanish and English rhymes that children use for begging, and we also gave them the recipe of pancakes, which happens to be the same as an old Asturian dish called "finsuelos".

There are tales and rhymes about Hallowe'en, Guy Fakwes Day, Christmas, Valentines, Pancake Tuesday, Good Friday, Easter, April's Fool Day, First of May, May Oak's Day, etc. and teachers can bring them to the classroom to do teaching activities and create tasks in a contextualized way. Let's mention some short rhymes that deal with such events:

"Happy New Year!. Happy New Year!
I've come to wish you a Happy New Year.
I've got a little pocket and it is very thin,
Please give me a penny to put some money in.
If you haven't got a penny, a halfpenny will do,
If you haven't got a halfpenny, well
God bless you!"

"Old father Valentine
Draw up your window blind;
If you wish to hear us sing,
Come and let us in".

"Pancake Tuesday, mother's busy baking,
We are helping, lovely pancakes making,
Pancake Tuesday, mix them up and fry them,
When they are done you can come and try them".

"Tippety, tippety, tin,
Give me a pancake and I will come in.
Tippety, tippety, toe,
Give me a pancake and I will go".

"A duck in the pond,
A fish in the pool,
Whoever reads this
Is a big April fool".

Other rhymes and tales can be included in the syllabus as useful material for helping linguistic revisions. For instance if we want to brush up on professions we may use an A,B, C rhyme that says: A was an archer, who shot a dog,/ B was a butcher and had a great dog....". With it we can invite students to make a competitive activity such as: "Can you remember what the profession of A, B, o C was?; or ask the students to end up each verse, once given the first part of it, or tell them to recreate the rhyme. We may be surprised by the wit that some have!, specially if we ask them to write limericks about somebody they know. Similar teaching techniques can be used with riddles.

Let's see the following rhyme:

"A was an apple-pie,
B bit it,
C cut it,
D dealt it,
E eat it,
F fought for it,
G got it,
H had it,
I inspected it,
J jumped for it,
K kept it,
L longed for it,
M mourned for it,
N nodded at it,
O opened it,
P peeped in it,
Q quartered it,
R ran for it,
S stole it,
T took it,
U upset it,
V viewed it,
W wanted it,
X,Y,Z, and ampersand
All wished for a piece in hand".

Any experienced teacher will soon realize that the rhyme may serve for practising spelling, as well as for verb revision and the pronunciation of the past tense -ed. We can teach it through a filling the gap dynamic, giving students different parts of the rhyme and ask them to complete it, etc.

If we are studying the parts of the body, we can give students a rhyme which can serve as a scenario. It says: "Brow bender,/ eyer peeper, / nose dreeper, / mouth eater, / Chin chopper,/ Knock at the door, / Ring the bell, / Lift up the latch, / walk in.../ Take the chair, / Sit by there, / How d'you do this morning?".

Chain-tales such as the well-known "...butcher, butcher, kill the ox!;/ Ox won't drink water;/ water won't quench the fire; / fire won't burn stick,/ stick won't...", are fun for working in the class. The rhyme helps students to remember the sequences. Students can create new characters and the class can make very long tales from a chain-tale.

Sneezing in the class may be fun and it is a good opportunity for telling students that not all the sneezes bring the same fate to a person. This depends on the day you sneeze: "Sneeze on Monday, sneeze for danger;/ sneeze on Tuesday, kiss a stranger; /Sneeze on Wednesday, get a letter;/ Sneeze on Friday, sneeze for sorrow; / Sneeze on Saturday, see your sweetheart tomorrow". Any teacher of English is aware that this rhyme can also serve for lexical and phonetic revision of the /i:/, initial /s/ and /z/, phonemes which often are not well pronounced by Spanish speakers.

Tales are useful for practising oral and written comprehension and also for oral and written expression. Students can collect local folk stories and write them in English, re-create a given tale, write different endings, introduce new characters, write a new tale with themselves the protagonists, etc, because as, E. Cook, points out "just as myths and fairy tales can be recreated for children, they can be recreated by children, not only in words, but also in movement, shape and colour. Children bring their own experience in the process, just as the classical poets and mediaeval romancers did."

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