

# An Overview of Culture to teach EFL through Using Folk Literature: A Sample Case of Nasreddin Hodja

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## Abstract

Folk literature consists of cultural input which is an integrated part of L2 teaching. Traditional literature provides many advantages such as those L2 learners will be better motivated to read cultural familiar stories, and that instructors will better focus on already known vocabulary and cultural implications in the first language (L1). In this perspective, traditional Turkish literature in the stories of Nasreddin Hodja, a ubiquitous cultural figure whose anecdotes are invoked with remarkable frequency by authors, speakers, and people-in-the street alike, has been selected to illustrate how to adjust the cultural requirements of EFL students at various levels

**Keywords:** Cultural awareness, traditional Nasreddin Hodja's stories; folk literature; skills development

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Role of short stories and Folk Tales in EFL

If we are asked what is meant by a short story we need only say it is a story which is short. It can be anything that the author decides it will be. The shortest of short stories may be no more than a page or two in length; the longest may run to over a hundred pages. Obviously there comes a point at which it is possible to draw a line between the long short story and the short novel. Folk literature includes fable, myth, tall tale and anecdotes.

A short story is a simple thing; it aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely therefore set a limit to it: it must explode and finish before fatigue sets in. Although the short story did not reach the height of its popularity until the beginning of the present century it is one of the oldest types of literature.

"Short stories are often an ideal way of introducing students to literature in the foreign language classroom", say Collie & Slater (190: 196). For the teacher they offer various immediate and effective advantages. First of all, their practical length means they can usually be read entirely within one or two class lessons. As Collie & Slater say "[...] students get that feeling of achievement at having come to the end of a whole work, much sooner" (1990: 196).

When we pick up a book of short stories we understand that we face a structure we must enter quickly and exit soon. Nevertheless, a story may remain with us just as powerfully as a novel. The short story is short enough to possess completely. Moody agrees with Collie & Slater and says that short stories have practical advantage of being more manageable: that is, a story can often be read to a class at a single sitting, or studied as a single assignment, whether in or out of class (1990: 14). An EFL teacher has the advantage that the whole story can be experienced simultaneously by the whole of his class, which often makes discussion easier. A short story, also, invites comparison and imitation, and is easily connected with the kinds of written assignments that students themselves can be expected to do.

Foreign language learners, for various reasons, develop psychological and socio-cultural prejudices against the language learning and language teaching environment, if not developed methodologically. Therefore, language material becomes even more difficult to learn. Within this hardship, folk tales come to the aid of learners. "Written and oral products, as well as the culture and values of a nation are also important. All of these products are the carrier of the language and culture. Nasreddin Hodja jokes have a crucial role in this aspect of culture in our lives" (Ozbay, 2005: 313).

It is essential to maintain an enjoyable class atmosphere with the help of native jokes and folk tales in L2 teaching activities. The activities of the classroom environment should be composed of enjoyable elements derived from culture oriented folk tales whose element of humor is well-established that L2 learners might come across in everyday life situations. Given this necessity, translated Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes are tailor-made for this application in EFL. Because, "Hodja, in accordance with the context, acts as a woman, a teacher, salesman, husband, administrator, debater, mediator, guest, wise man, judge, trickster, father, neighbor, plaintiff, hunter, claimant deputy, researcher, etc. This is, in particular Anatolia, the whole world in general map gives us human"

(Çotuksöken 1996: 118). Critical insight into the teacher can take different shapes and maximizes the attention of the person who reads. Nasreddin Hodja jokes laugh us to think in the problems we face in our daily lives and thereby provoking learners to be exposed to comprehensible input in L2 (Asilioglu 2008: 3).

### **1.2. Nasreddin Hodja Tales**

The tales of Nasreddin Hodja are the most well-known Turkish stories in and abroad. His stories end with an open ending in a happy tone that gives a lesson to the listeners. They also depict the social and cultural aspects of the time in a humorous way (Sullivan 2002: 2). The protagonist of the tales is always the Hodja himself and the tales stereotypically start with the clichés “One day the Hodja ...” We see a great variety of adopted roles by Nasreddin Hodja himself. The themes of the stories vary from ordinary person asking for a road direction to a judge settling a money problem or a traveler arguing with his donkey.

Nasreddin Hodja was born in Sivrihisar, Turkey in the time of Tamerlane in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and died in 1284. All the stories are attributed to the Hodja, as he was both wise and intelligent, who makes always clever remarks in the jokes. His title “Hodja” means teacher or master in Turkish given to respected persons in society. He blended humor with wisdom, and solutions to conflicts turn out to be amusing and educating for all.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, the attention of the learners must be well-focused on the material studied. Thus, the length of the stories fits in the purpose of motivation in learning. Some are very short, while some others are an entire page or longer (Erkaya 2011: 59). When we analyze the entire collection of the tales we can come up with the idea that the very short ones appear very suitable to maintain the fluency in reading. The longer stories such as “You believed that it gave birth” (Kabacali 1997 cited in Erkaya 2011: 59) are composed of literary elements such as main character, secondary characters, setting, conflict, resolution, rising action and falling action, which are the basis of short story analysis.

As for the setting of the tales, they generally take place in the town in which Nasreddin Hodja lives. In addition to that, other locations which pertain to the socio-cultural elements of the time are mentioned such as main market, mosque, hamam (Turkish bath), court house, and some others in a similar manner. In line with traditional story analysis, time refers to the time when people rode horses or walked everywhere centuries ago. As for the conflicts of the stories, each anecdote has a problem to be interfered and waits to be solved by Nasreddin Hodja who is disguised in many roles.

In reference to resolution readers find the solution in the last few lines. When the tension falls down reader sees the change in the main character. In the anecdote “Don’t Be Silly” (Kabacali 1997) the Hodja looks for his lost ring in broad daylight on the street in front of the basement where he actually lost it. When a passer-by asks why he doesn’t look for it in the basement, the Hodja replies “don’t be silly, how do you expect me to find anything in that darkness” (Kabacali, 1997). The Hodja concludes by giving a humorous but ironical lesson to readers as they should do all as required.

## **2. Advantages of Using translated “Nasreddin Hodja” Tales in L2 Teachings**

### **2.1. The contribution of “Hodja tales” into cultural awareness**

In EFL curriculum, instructors are required to refer to values, beliefs and customs of any society about which they convey background information that might be used in interactive teaching. Instructors may be teaching any culture, which is not necessarily one of those of English native-speakers, namely English culture. L2 learners are advised to add variety and large scope by reading stories and folk tales from different backgrounds so that they could enrich their knowledge of about certain cultures. Cultural awareness and enrichment as is stated by Collie & Slater (1990: 88) contribute to the productive skills, for cognitive implications are ready to put into oral and written production. Furthermore, reading target culture through folk tales, “students learn about the past, present and customs” (Erkaya 2005: 44).

Folk tales are inseparable instruments to convey the information from past histories about attitudes and beliefs. As we learn from Nasreddin Hodja’s stories in the past Turkish society was much different from the present one. However, some of the traditions and customs may have been unchanged and transferred to present times. In connection with this, utilizing translated folk tales from their own country; cultural-familiar students can initiate fluency in discussion as they are familiar with the context. As for the students unfamiliar with Nasreddin Hodja, there may be a cultural interference, which is also an opportunity to compare and contrast the two aspects of culture.

Culturally-familiar folk tales may provide easiness to beginner level students, for they have to deal with unknown words and syntax (Erkaya, 2011, 61). Already known cultural aspects of stories will maintain a good chance to get focused on linguistic aspects of the story. In short, culturally-familiar stories may be better comprehended than a story written in foreign culture.

### **2.2. Contribution of folk tales into vocabulary enrichment**

Vocabulary teaching and learning should make the precedence for both instructors and learners; however, vocabulary is a neglected aspect of language learning. Despite numerous scientific articles on the

importance of vocabulary enrichment, small developments have been made as regards the issue in the EFL syllabi. English departments are seen to give priority to grammar development at least up to pre-intermediate level, and then vocabulary studies are taken into consideration. Given such hardships in L2 teaching, most instructors have taken up story teaching to help students learn more vocabulary.

As Collie & Slater (1990: 54) affirm, instructors should get into “literary texts” that are already rich in vocabulary. Vocabulary builds the foundation for students to make progress in the target language. Thus, it is logical to affirm that enriched vocabulary capacity will increase the level of understanding the texts in the target language. Instructors should adapt the strategies to teach vocabulary to students at different levels of EFL. There could be varieties in the adaptations of such strategies. The knowledge of students in vocabulary will increase in the years. Therefore, the level of language should be taken into consideration and learning strategies should be accordingly adapted.

Learning strategies can be reinforced with the help of folk tales; thus, it is logical to emphasize the vocabulary context of the translated folk tales prior to getting into the Hodja stories. For example, the story “The Pot That Gave Birth” (Kabacali 1997) is a very simple anecdote which is suitable for beginning-level students. The students must be made familiar with the kitchen utensils and relevant pottery with the help of vocabulary cards. Before the anecdote, instructor can review the pottery in an ordinary kitchen, and ask students which of them do they have in the houses? As long as the vocabulary found in the story mentioned is concrete, students can visualize them better in future.

Another activity that can be given to students at the intermediate level is writing down the steps of rain-making together with the names of clouds. After they discuss on the steps of how rain is formed using the pertaining vocabulary in science as well, students can listen to instructor telling Hodja’s joke of “Hodja the Rain Maker” (Kabacali, 1997). Instructor can ask students what the Hodja meant by the lesson from the story. Instructor can explain that rain is formed not by “Hodja’s dry shirt”, but by scientific steps of vaporization, condensation, and formation of rains drops in cold clouds. Next, students can write the steps by adding the butt of joke of Hodja in the story in their compositions. Such activities include the properties of vocabulary teaching by involvement and integration of students into producing target language in a humorous and meaningful manner (Nagy1988:33). Students generally believe that vocabulary teaching is boring and painstaking. According to Basurto (2004: 3) “direct vocabulary teaching can be creative, exciting and enjoyable for students and instructors (cited in Erkaya 2011: 64).

### 3. Conclusion

The use of anecdotes increases student motivation and interest in the use of language teaching paragraphs and provides learners to participate in a more efficient manner. The fact that stories are short in length increases learner’s motivation to read more for comprehensible input and interest. In this way, L2 learners are empowered to develop the four basic language skills through class participation. Learners surely come across new words and terms in each paragraph of the anecdotes. However, the students who do not know the meanings of target vocabulary can guess their meanings from the context as they are better oriented into the culture of anecdotes. In this way, they achieve vocabulary development and recollect them in the long run as those words are gained through an experience of recollection. Thus, the use of anecdotes helps students produce better verbal output and in this way syntax of the L2 is better gained.

Through the moral values, personal conflicts and humorous situations within the anecdotes, L2 learners jump into new culture and develop new perspectives; therefore, they get developed in the production skills of L2. In an enjoyable learning environment within critical reading skills, students develop productive skills. As embedded in the cultures of jokes, Hodja injects hope to the people of each lineage. Interpreted in terms of the life of optimism, jokes, personal and collective grief of all mankind, translated Hodja tales serve to correct social faults, which sound very attractive to learners, and thus instigate their involvement in learning process. Here in the locality and the timeliness of these features within the context of national values has now reached a stage where the universal acknowledgment has been achieved.

Translated folk tales and native stories offer a good number of advantages. Students’ motivation can be increased with the familiarity of the culture. Vocabulary enrichment can be maintained through various activities with the help of humorous anecdotes. Linguistic aspects of the stories can be better focused on and all levels of fluency can be better familiar with the vocabulary that they can derive from the context. Familiar context may provide easiness in the vocabulary enrichment. Folk tales are of various length and difficulty. Instructors can categorize the anecdotes in accordance with students’ levels. The tales of Nasreddin Hodja are great in number, which can be used by Turkish and non-Turkish students as well at all levels of language learning.

### Appendix – An analysis of a tale “The pot that gave birth”

One day the Hodja borrowed a large pot from his neighbor. Next day he returned it with a smaller pot inside. When questioned about it, he said: “Oh! I forgot to tell you. Your pot gave birth to that small one!” His neighbor was amazed, but gladly accepted both the explanation and the baby pot.

Some days later, the Hodja again required the same large pot from his neighbor, who lent it to him with alacrity. But this time, although several days had gone by, there was no word from the Hodja. After waiting for a few more days, the neighbor went around to the Hodja’s door. “Hodja Effendi, what has happened to that pot I lent you”, he asked.

“Why, didn’t you hear the sad news? Your pot died the very night I borrowed it from you”, he replied.

“Come now, Hodja Effendi, you don’t expect me to believe that a pot can die, do you?”

“Well, you are a funny one!” replied the Hodja. “You readily believed me when I said it had given birth to a baby-pot, but now that I say it’s dead, why don’t you believe me?”

#### Analysis of the tale:

Main character – the Hodja

Secondary Character – his neighbor

Setting: Place: Aksehir. Time: centuries earlier, Conflict: The Hodja created an atmosphere to put his neighbor in a difficult position. The neighbor thought the Hodja was easily gullible, and he himself could trick him out for small benefits like a pot.

Resolution: The Hodja gave him a lesson that honesty is the best policy in all ways. Fringe benefits should not change one’s chastity and no one should try abuse others thinking that himself is smarter. However, the Hodja happens to outsmart his neighbor, who is required to get a lesson from his indecency.

#### **Summary**

Folk tales are valuable instruments to convey the information from past histories. It is of great importance in language teaching empathy. Translated Nasreddin Hodja jokes are approached with empathy in the paragraphs in teaching English as well as increase motivation to learn and read more, which provides comprehensible input. EFL teachers can well utilize such anecdotes, which are very short and advantageous to prolong interest and concentration in the reading materials. It has also provided by many researches that traditional folk tales well contribute into cultural awareness, a composite ingredient in EFL teaching, Vocabulary can be an obstacle in EFL as learners cannot acquire them efficiently. Interests- arousing folk tales are found to encourage learners to focus on vocabulary build-up as learners are engrossed into intensive reading. It is also reinforced in many studies that those L2 learners will be better motivated to read cultural familiar stories and that beginners will not be intimidated in getting acquainted with different culture in texts. In this perspective, this paper deals with the significance of translated Nasreddin Hodja tales in EFL, as a common denominator of traditional Turkish literature. The stories of Nasreddin Hodja can be incorporated with remarkable frequency by instructors and provide easiness for EFL students at various levels

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