

**Idea Sharing:  
Using Tales to Teach EFL Students with Low  
Levels of English Language Proficiency**

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***Kevin Dempsey***

*Rajamangala University, Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand*

*and*

***Martin Murray***

*CMA Secondary School, Kowloon, Hong Kong S.A.R.*

**Introduction**

This paper is a short sharing of some practical ideas on teaching EFL students through tales. The use of literature in the EFL classroom is by no means rare, especially when student language proficiency is high. It has been argued, for example, that the popular Harry Potter novels can be used for teaching grammar (Wasanasomsithi, 2003) and also that such popular literature as this can be used to develop critical thinking (Wasanasomsithi, 2001). However, the focus of this article is on teaching EFL students with low levels of English, where motivation can be low and language proficiency tends to be fossilized. With these students, the use of more complex literature would be inappropriate. Simple tales especially when supported by pictorial and written scaffolding can help restore these students' motivation to learn and lead them towards meaningful improvements in all micro skills through the use of an appropriately tailored integrated task chain.

While tales have long been used in EFL for the teaching of young children and for the testing of language performance (Szulc-

Kurpaska, 1999), it must be acknowledged that they have often been regarded as inappropriate for use in the secondary and tertiary EFL classroom (Savvidou, 2004). The rise of utilitarian values has further discouraged their use (Takagaki, 2002). It is the conviction of the EFL teachers co-writing this paper that traditional tales should be more highly valued for their rich cultural and linguistic content and be given a more prominent place in the contemporary EFL Curriculum.

### **Why use traditional tales?**

We live in an era where many traditional fairy tales have become familiar across languages and cultures. Some (Pennycook, 1998; Tam, 2005) might consider the use of traditional English fairy tales in the teaching of EFL to be an example of English cultural colonialism. Anyone with such scruples would be well advised to use some well known fairy tales that are indigenous to their EFL students' own culture. In fact if indigenous tales are the more well known in a particular area, they would be the best to use. An advantage of using tales from the students' own culture is they are more the expert on the tale's content than their native English speaking teacher and thereby motivated and encouraged (Randolph, 2001).

Tales often touch a place deep within our subconscious (Bruti, 1999). Perhaps this helps explain why tales, particularly illustrated ones, are so good at helping EFL learners make connections with their prior knowledge, rapidly facilitating significant language learning (Berman, 2000). Learners acquire the ability to interpret tale discourse in social and cultural contexts and this assists them to acquire communicative competence (Savvidou, 2004).

The use of tales not only engages students' intellects but also their emotions and imaginations thereby helping to alleviate the risk of English developing a dry lifeless image in the minds of EFL learners (Takagaki, 2002). Tales also offer more scope for creativity than many other text types (Bruti, 1999). They provide entertaining, meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language (Gonzales, 1998). They may also

assist students to make sense of their own experience of life (Nünning, 2003).

Looking at tale picture books, hearing tales read aloud, and the reading aloud of tales were part of most people's early first language experiences. Tales, particularly when part of shared common background knowledge, can be a powerful aid for EFL learning. Their simple narrative form helps keep EFL learners interested in spite of temporary misunderstandings due to new or unfamiliar language (Randolph, 2001). Most of all, it is the familiarity and often sequential form of this genre that makes tales such an ideal stimulus for EFL writing.

### **Introducing tales to the EFL Curriculum**

It is common practice across much of Asia including Thailand and Hong Kong to let commercially available textbooks dictate the curriculum. While it must be acknowledged that there are applied linguists who oppose the use of textbooks (Thornbury, S. and Meddings, L., 2001) even those who support their use concede that they are often only chosen for their time saving capacity (Harmer, J. 2001) rather than their appropriacy. There may be many practical reasons for using such textbooks but the EFL teachers sharing their classroom experiences here felt the need to take some brave new steps in another direction. Instead of worrying about which curriculum hoops needed to be jumped through each week: what pages needed to be turned in class according to the teaching scheme or what micro skill(s) the official timetable stated ought to be taught an alternative approach was adopted. Narrow short term goals, such as those listed above, were set aside so that a long term global goal of students improving their global English proficiency could be focused on. It must be said that the kinds of students these teachers taught pushed them in this direction. Often the classes were composed of unmotivated students who lived in an environment that made English seem largely irrelevant to them and who were alienated from the curriculum that the educational authority had mandated for them.

Tales together with sequenced sketches (Figure 1) depicting each main step of the story plot were chosen because of their multiple uses. Visual images supported the text by giving clues to meaning. The value of using pictures in EFL has long been recognized (Wright, 1989). Research has also shown that picture books can be used successfully not only with children but also with adults (Randolph, 2001). By first reading a tale text aloud an EFL teacher can help promote language acquisition in EFL learners, especially in the early stages of EFL learning (O'Neill, 1999). New vocabulary and grammar can be taught in context as required (Berman, 2000). The frequent use of past tense and direct speech in tales also helps make the students' task very much easier (Bruti, 1999).

Sometimes students were first asked to listen to a dramatic retelling of a tale, other times they were asked to read a tale and to retell a tale themselves using the rough sequenced sketches provided as a guide. Lastly, students were asked to write down the tale in their own words. This procedure of having students retell a tale in spoken and then written form was assisted by the use of drawings that provided scaffolding that supported learning. Furthermore, the linking of one task to another (listening, retelling, writing) thereby creating a task chain helped to reduce the amount of language that a student needed to work with at one time while also increasing the time and number of ways a student used the language. Such task chains have been recommended by Nunan (2004).

This last activity gave invaluable feedback about the students' actual level of English proficiency, something that is often masked when using textbooks in large classes. Informal observations during several weeks of tale lessons showed increased motivation to learn English. Students were on task more during the reading segment of each lesson. Others have also noted the high level of engagement when using a literature text type with EFL learners be they children or adults (Tomlinson, C. & McGraw, R. 1997). The rough sketches used not only assisted students understand and recall each tale's main story line but also captured their interest and helped to increase their motivation to learn. Students were writing more than ever before

and asking more questions about vocabulary while completing the final writing task.

Another reason for the successful use of tales with these students was considered to be their simple sequential form. This lent itself to the use of very simple tailor-made writing guides that followed the same sequence as the rough sketches of each tale's plot line. There was no need to include words in the writing guide. When a student requested a word in order to complete the task it was written on the blackboard on request as required.

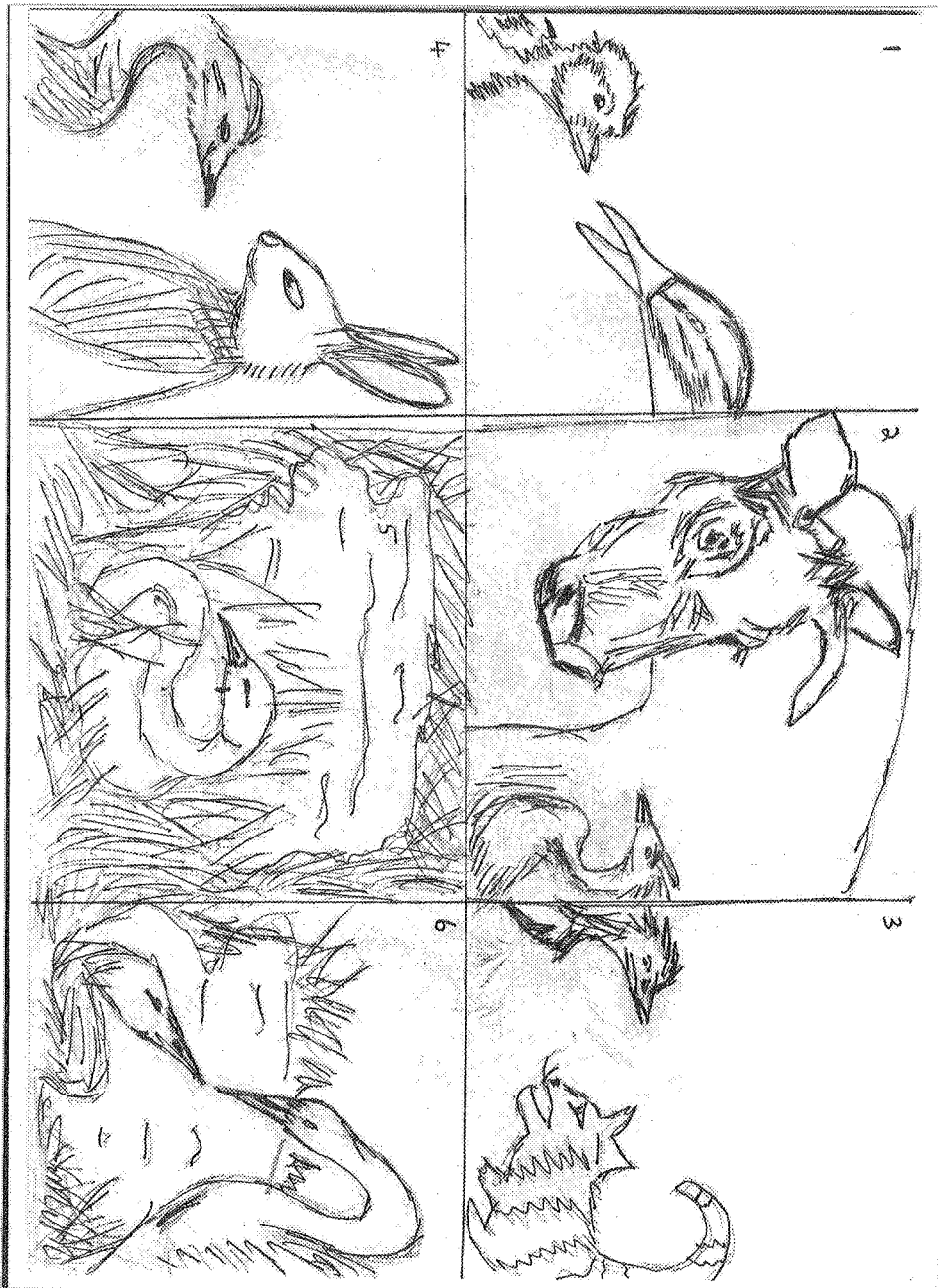
### **Conclusion**

Randolph (2001) rightly notes that by applying Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' language teachers can assist their learners *at their actual level of language development* to reach their potential level in a language learning environment that increases teacher-student psychological proximity. Our own observations while using folktales in EFL teaching seemed to support this. Certainly it was found that simple traditional tales suited low level students much better than set textbooks which tended to be far too difficult for them. Furthermore as teacher and students reacted to the tales with laughter, amusement or interest the level of empathy and rapport between them began to far surpass anything usually encountered in a textbook based lesson.

**Figure 1.** 2006 Murray, M. ***A Rough Sketch***

**An example of one of the Sequenced sketches used that depicts**

**'The Ugly Duckling' tale**



## The Authors

Kevin Dempsey worked as an English Language Instructor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute for several years. He has a Bachelor of Arts. He is currently employed as an English Language Instructor at Rajamangala University, Bangkok.

Martin Murray worked as an English Language Instructor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute during the latter part of 2005. He has a Bachelor of Education (Languages/Asian Studies), a Master of Applied Linguistics, and a Master of Educational Administration. He is currently employed as a Native English Teacher under the NET Scheme in Hong Kong.

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