English Language Teaching and Literacy: Research and Reflections

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Representation of Gender Roles in Literary Texts: Classroom Activities

Jariah Mohd. Jan & Rosli Talif

Introduction

Children have been exposed to various forms of literary texts throughout their lives. These include nursery rhymes, fairy tales, folklores, and mythologies. They were told stories at bedtime, at kindergarten, and even during their earlier years in the public school. To some extent, certain nursery rhymes such as London bridge is falling down, Twinkle-twinkle little star, and Ring a ring of roses are recited, hummed, and sang during playtime.

Exposure to these literary forays at a tender age, resulted in the formation of psychological conditioning and societal values and mores of the cultures that created them. As children grow and develop, their ideas about their own sex and gender began to form. The lessons and social behaviors of characters depicted in the literary texts especially fairy tales are clearly embedded in the children’s minds and continue to influence them throughout their lives. There is a likelihood that subtle forms of sexism also began to emerge.

The Folklore Genre: Children’s Fairy Tales

The folklore genre encompasses folktales, fables, myths, and legends. This literature is handed down through centuries by word of mouth and it allows us to retain our cultural foundations and understand the foundations and beliefs of cultures that are similar or quite different from our own. Our schema for the setting of a folktale is easily proven such that we could only close our eyes and listen to, “Once upon a time...” and we are immediately transported to an era where there lies a majestic castle or a deep, mysterious woods. We may easily recognise the plot or the quest as the good characters overcome their evil foes.

This study examines several children’s fairy tales which are a genre of literature that occupies different levels of interpretation. Fairy tales are more than simple bedtime stories for small children. A fairy tale is more than a singular story, more than one distinct relation of characters and events. On the most basic level, they are stories created for the purpose of entertainment and is considered as a form of socialization to a particular society and time period. Fairy tales can be categorized into Classic Tales and Modern Tales (Jariah Mohd. Jan and Rosli Talif, 2001:5) and some of the popular fairy tales that proved to be a hit amongst children include the following (see Table 1):
Table 1: Categorization of fairy tales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Classic Tales – before 1990s</th>
<th>Modern Tales – after 1990s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Hansel and Gretel</em></td>
<td><em>The Swan Princess</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>Little Red Riding Hood</em></td>
<td><em>Ever After</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Goldilocks and the Three Bears</em></td>
<td><em>Mulan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Rapunzel</em></td>
<td><em>Pocahontas I and II</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Princess and the Pea</em></td>
<td><em>The Little Mermaid I and II</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><em>Cinderella</em></td>
<td><em>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><em>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</em></td>
<td><em>El Dorado</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td><em>Sleeping Beauty</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td><em>Beauty and the Beast</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The authority of strict class lines and prejudices are upheld in most fairy tales that in turn reflect the place and view of gender roles in upper class society. By analysing fairy tales, a reader will not only become aware of cultural perception but will also unfold the roles of women, their identity, or lack thereof, as well as the sexuality of women.

**Perception of Gender Roles in Fairy Tales**

The contention of this paper is to examine fairy tales and to particularly highlight the existence of gender roles. This study will also identify their message about gender roles and investigate how these roles are represented. This section provides some explanation of the roles of men and women within the existing fairy tales according to its portrayal of characters and themes.

**a. Characters: Good vs Evil**

Characters refer to the people in the story and what they are like. Characters perform actions and overcome the various conflicts in the story. Children enjoy stories in which they can identify with the characters, recognize their feelings, and understand why they act in certain ways. According to Norton (1992), a believable, enjoyable story needs main characters who seem lifelike and who develop throughout the story. The characters in fairy tales such as the prince or the princess; however, are not well developed. They are easily characterized in one or two sentences and they do not change within the story. For example, the princess is usually portrayed as beautiful, kind, and generous, and the prince is usually handsome, noble, and brave.

The male characters in fairy tales are seen as dominant, aggressive, and powerful. They have been portrayed as the ‘knight in shining armour’, ever so often the rescuers, saviours for the ‘helpless damsels.’

The female characters, on the other hand, have often been the objects of stereotypical and misogynistic attitudes. Mysogynistic refers to one who distrusts and hates women. Most of the female characters occupy a unique dichotomy in most of the stories in that they are either exceptionally good or utterly evil.
Being “good” implies qualities such as the following:

- simple
- kind
- obedient
- generous
- well mannered
- gullible
- passive
- subservient
- obliging
- understanding
- patient
- unaware
- tolerant

Being breathtakingly beautiful is the most important of all since beauty may refer to one’s physical attribute or beauty in a very traditionally feminine way that is innate beauty referring to one’s personality trait. The princess and the fairy godmother are top on this list.

“Good” women are always in need of being rescued, either by male saviours or by some sort of magic. The “good” women, according to Grappo (1999), initiate nothing because they are not actual characters, but they are merely representations of a role, generic objects mired in passivity. They are only real in their relation to male characters, the helpless victim to save, the beauty to marry, the evil fairy to outwit. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, the Swan Princess, and Snow White all fall into the category of naïve, and dependent heroine. The characteristics that are considered “good” in a woman in the fairy tales is, in all probability the very same as those considered desirable of a woman of that society.

On the other extreme end, that is being “evil” depicts the following qualities:

- cruel
- jealous
- selfish
- scheming
- active (proactive)
- old
- unkind
- stubborn
- aggressive
- vengeful
- ugly
- impatient
- manipulative
- vindictive
- ill mannered

“Evil” women are never young and beautiful; rather they are old and ugly. Most often they occupy positions of authority, for instance the roles of the stepmother, the stepsisters, the old fairies, the sorceress, and the witch.

Literature, no matter how far from reality or fantastic it may seem, is grounded in culture. Most fairy tale heroines occupy a role rather than a specific identity. Many do not, in the eyes of their authors, even merit a name. Instead, they are characterized according to the following:

a. by what they do, such as Cinderella (she lives in ‘cinders’) or Sleeping Beauty (she sleeps most of the time);
b. what they are, like the Swan Princess (she turns into a swan) or the Little Mermaid (she is a mermaid);
c. what they wear, exemplified by Little Red Riding Hood (she wears a red coloured hood).

Other heroines, as in Princess and the Pea, are simply identified as “princess.”

Women are generalizations; they are not given the status as actual individuals complete with names and real identities. Women are pawns since they did not have very much power in their own lives or in the society at large. They have been controlled by the men in their lives, and traded through marriage as a commodity. The status of women in the society may be regarded as being subordinate and to some ‘invincible’. According to Holmes (1997: 342), women are often assigned subordinate status by virtue of their gender alone, and treated linguistically as subordinate, regardless of their actual power or social status in a particular context.
About the Book

*English Language Teaching and Literacy: Research and Reflections* brings together the views and experiences of practitioners involved in the transmission and development of literacy related matters. They reflect a range of experiences and expertise from cross-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-national contexts.

The book takes the non-traditional view that the term literacy can extend from not only mother-tongue contexts to second and foreign language contexts. These contexts provide fresh evidence of learner strategies, teacher practices, institutional provisions and curricular designs that are both accommodative and innovative at the same time. Furthermore, the term literacy provides a unifying scope which allows for broad discussion and elaboration on the kinds of relationships that can exist between speakers, readers, writers, texts, teachers, learners and cultures.

The authors of the various chapters in this book explore practices, research and reflections on specific contexts of learning, and how these relate to the world of education (individual, institutional and social), communities as they exist, and forms of communication. Many of the chapters provide new perspectives that should challenge, extend, and reaffirm current views and practices of people working to enhance literacy.

The publication of this book is timely, in the sense that it reminds us of the almost cyclical link between conceptualisations, practices, experiments, research and reflections on all of these in order that literacy evolves and serves to enhance our lives. More to the point, *English Language Teaching and Literacy: Research and Reflections* presents a whole of educational perspectives pertaining to literacy that include preschool, primary and secondary school, tertiary institutions, teacher education generally and specific aspects such as methodology, programs and recipes for success. Topics covered include reading, testing, computers, motivating, thinking and critical skills, using literature, research findings, collaborative learning, dealing with errors, defining the roles within education and listening to teachers' voices.

The book should appeal and be useful to researchers, academicians, graduate students, teachers, curriculum planners, language program directors, teacher educators and pre-service teachers.