

Tale, Performance,  
and Culture in EFL  
Storytelling with  
Young Learners



# Tale, Performance, and Culture in EFL Storytelling with Young Learners:

*Stories Meant to be Told*

By

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To my son and my husband



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

ESL (English as a Second Language)

FL (Foreign Language)

L1 (First language/mother tongue)

L2 (Second language)

SL (Second Language)

TPR (Total Physical Response)



# INTRODUCTION

Every teacher is a storyteller. Telling stories in the classroom, or simply adopting a narrative mode to communicate curricular information to children, is something teachers do spontaneously, as they are aware of the didactic and pedagogical power of a good story.

Nevertheless, for too many teachers, the notion of using stories in the foreign language classroom is forbidding. Suddenly, the mode that seemed so natural in the language of school instruction, appears as a potential barrier that could hamper the teaching of the foreign language. But language teaching is not the only reason for using storytelling in the foreign language classroom. Telling stories can first of all help establish an emotionally conducive environment in which learning will happen as a consequence.

This book concentrates on the uses of storytelling based on authentic (written for native speakers) children's picturebooks with young learners (aged 5-11). The focus is on English as a (compulsory) foreign language (EFL) in school settings, with young learners. I refer to situations in which children have no exposure to English outside school (apart from what comes from media and occasional private lessons that parents deem necessary). In this context, teachers are often non-native speakers of English, whose L1 is usually the language of school instruction and who might find themselves teaching other subjects as well as English (which means that they are not solely concentrated on teaching a foreign language).

As children might be exposed to as little as one hour of English per week, I argue that storytelling represents a valuable linguistic input that can foster independent learning. Authentic picturebooks contain language in use that the children will take with them, into their homes and retrieve during their independent play. The stories heard in the EFL classroom will continue to echo in the children's minds: they will provide the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language that EFL learners lack, because they have no prior experience of being socialised in the foreign language. Storytelling with the aid of authentic picturebooks will provide the here and now in English that children need in order to acquire language, and a well-executed storytelling process will build linguistic memories teachers and children can refer back to.

In order to linger in our minds however, stories must have specific qualities; above all, they need to be conceived as read-aloud stories that are

meant to be performed by an adult. They must possess a most prominent aural component, as well as the power to be learned simply through repeated listening. In other words, they need to possess the qualities of oral narrative and to be told as oral narratives, regardless of the fact that they take the form of texts and illustrations.

The purpose of this book is to create a bridge linking studies of storytelling in foreign language teaching with folk narrative scholarship on traditional narrative and performance, in particular in the context of children's traditional storytelling, and with a view to grounding the study of EFL storytelling in its oral dimension.

## **EFL Storytelling and Folk Narrative**

There is a growing body of literature supporting the use of storytelling, with young learners and adults alike, for EFL teaching. Taking as universally accepted the many positive sides of storytelling as a teaching and pedagogical tool, scholars have transported it into the EFL classroom, and expanded upon its applications in language learning and teaching, with a view to inspiring children to adopt positive attitudes toward the new language (Cameron, 2001; Linse, 2007; Dujmović, 2006; G. Ellis and Brewster, 2014; Hemmati et al., 2015; Huang, 2006; Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, 1998; Mourão, 2016). Many EFL specialists support the use of authentic literature (Byram and Kramsch, 2008, 2008; Bland and Lütge, 2013; Burwitz-Melzer, 2001; Ghosn, 2002; Mourão, 2016) as the basis for storytelling, and they tend to stress the value of picturebooks for young EFL learners (Hsiu-Chih, 2008; Hsiu-Chinh, 2009; Lugossy, 2007). Linse (2007) has concentrated on the effects of repetition and predictability in picturebook texts, while Mourão (2016) has analysed responses children give to authentic picturebook texts, arguing that teachers should pay particular attention to children's literary discussions. Many others have promoted the use of traditional folk narrative (Wajnryb, 2003; Taylor, 2000; Morgan and Rinvulcri, 1983; Masoni, 2018b) in EFL teaching. Some of these works, however, are geared more toward teaching in the ESL classroom, where English is a second language and the learners are also immersed in the language and its culture outside the school walls.

Many EFL specialists consider authentic picturebooks excellent sources of natural-sounding language and compelling input for children—fostering their listening comprehension (Hemmati et al., 2015), as well as reading comprehension and word recall (Huang, 2006); some scholars also see such books as offering windows on the cultures of the target language (Masoni,

2016, 2018a, 2017; Linse, 2007; Mourão, 2016; Cameron, 2001; Ghosn, 2002), windows that constitute a precious source for intercultural comparisons.

In *Tell it again: the storytelling handbook for primary school children*, Ellis and Brewster (2014) offer a comprehensive view of the many advantages of using storytelling and authentic picturebooks in the EFL classroom: for example, stories are enjoyable and help establish a positive attitude towards the foreign language, because they represent interesting input (Krashen, 1992, 2004); they are a shared event that fosters community learning; they help children learn intonation, pronunciation and a great deal of vocabulary; teachers can use them to revise vocabulary and help children begin to construct their own small narratives; and they portray cultures of the target language. Ellis and Brewster (2014) also provide detailed lesson plans (see also Cameron, 2001), drawing attention to the language of books, to the activities that can be carried out after reading, and to teaching outcomes.

Despite this upsurge of literature on the benefits of storytelling for second and foreign language learning, storytelling is still underused, even by proficient and native teachers. Ellis and Brewster (*op. cit.*) reflect on possible reasons for some teachers' reticence to tell stories in the EFL classroom, including lack of time, perceived low proficiency, and fear that children might be unable to follow an entire story. While these explanations apply to most situations, I believe that we need to take one more factor into account: the moment storytelling became a language learning activity in its own right, it lost some of its original power. In much of the literature the focus has been on what can be done with stories—i.e., on storytelling as the basis for a lesson plan with learning outcomes. And while the emotional and social dimension of storytelling is widely recognised, the actual power of performance to spur language learning has not received sufficient attention. Yet, it is in the experience of being told the story that the majority of learning takes place: it is the *telling* that makes storytelling a powerful didactic tool like no other.

I argue that, if we wish to make a strong case for the necessity to implement the use of storytelling in the EFL classroom, we need to reach back to the oral and social dimensions of storytelling and see it first and foremost as the moment when a story is told, face to face, by a storyteller who knows his/her audience. The experience of being told a story is first of all an emotionally positive experience for a child, not just because of the pleasant quality of the tales, but also because it is cognitively empowering: a well-chosen and well-told story can make children feel able to cope with the foreign language and will reward them with a great deal of

acquisition/learning. A well-prepared story is rewarding also for teachers, who will continue to learn and acquire language with the children.

Making children feel able to cope with a foreign language in a school setting is the first step towards helping them establish a positive relationship with the language, one that will result in lifelong learning. Research tells us that early exposure to foreign languages does not necessarily result in enhanced learning: this is partly due to limited exposure to the language in school settings, but is also due to emotional reasons related to quality of input: i.e., if the methods for teaching the language are not emotionally conducive to learning, children might actually develop “a sense of failure about language learning that could only impede future learning” (Wray, 2008: 267).

This aspect is even more important when the foreign language is English. From a very early age the learning of English, in countries where it is the only compulsory foreign language, comes with high expectations, due to its commercial and communicative power. In such contexts, it is essential to cultivate a positive relationship with English by empowering children through activities that boost their perceived competence. Being told a story can nurture competence, while at the same time provide children with a great deal of useful language and fundamental intercultural awareness.

Bringing an understanding of traditional oral narrative to the study of EFL storytelling—thereby grounding it in previous and current studies of folk narrative—is crucial, because folklorists’ recent narrative studies have concentrated on key aspects such as the nature of performance in folk narrative (looking at how texts are brought to life in the act of telling), on the relationship between the text and its delivery, and on the comparison of texts from across the world to enhance cultural understanding. Even the most powerful story cannot be effective if there is not an adult who brings out all its potential for language learning and puts it out there through skilful performances that children can readily grasp. Performance is vital for activating EFL learning. Children are immersed in our narrative performances from the day they are born. They look at us, enraptured, as we talk about our boring days at work, if we speak with the right tone, looking into their eyes, associating words, when necessary, with often exaggerated expressions of suspense, joy, surprise and disgust. During such moments, children acquire language, even if all we are doing is trying to entertain them, or prevent them from crying. Immersed in our stories, children grow up lulled by the rhythm of narrative language; their first approach to language is narrative. Then, the day comes when they want to tell their stories, and what they do is imitate our narrative style, simulating surprise,



telling funny jokes, creating expectations, using pauses, and emphasizing words in order to surprise or shock their audience. Content and narrative coherence do not really matter at that stage; rather, what matters is *how* things are told. Children are expert storytellers before they are expert story makers. In other words, they might not have a coherent story, or a *storiable* story (i.e., a story that is worthy of this definition in an adult's view), but they will know how to tell it, using their voice, their hands and their body language. To them, the performance is the story. And they have learned their language largely through performances: it is through dialogue, and instances of authentic spoken communication, that children will acquire a substantial share of their pragmatic competence.

EFL learners also should be exposed to narrative language, and language which is exaggerated for the purposes of performance. For this reason, I will look at the functions of storytelling in EFL through the lens of performance, in the conviction that the moment a story is told, shared and co-told needs further attention; indeed, too many studies place their emphasis on what can be done with a narrative after telling it, rather than *while* telling it. In the course of this book, I will draw attention to the importance of the performative moment, when children *play* at speaking English: what are the implications of performance for children's learning, for their identity and for their relationship with the new language?

The subtitle *Stories Meant to be Told* refers to my strong belief that the stories that work best in the EFL classroom are those with a strong aural element, that can easily be learned just by hearing, and that please the ear as well as the mind. But what are the links between picturebooks and the tradition of children's storytelling that prefigured and inspired them? I believe these links are important for an understanding of the potential of storytelling as an EFL teaching tool. The choice of a text for EFL should be informed by narrative studies of traditional oral narrative, where the text was designed to be performed and learned aurally.

Folk narrative studies also help us understand how to compare texts, according to motifs, and how to use stories to promote cultural understanding. I argue that only by becoming aware of what growing up with stories meant in oral societies can we fully appreciate how stories might aid children in learning a new language, extracting the images of culture embedded in its words, and mapping them onto a vision of themselves that takes into consideration the point of view of the Other.

What are the links between the ideal EFL picturebook and traditional narrative texts? How does the study of performance help us understand the power of storytelling in the EFL classroom? And how can traditional

narrative studies help us find a way of using stories to improve comparative abilities that are at the heart of intercultural competence?

These are some of the central questions this book aims to address.

# CHAPTER 1

## STORYTELLING AND TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE

To understand the implications for read-aloud language learning through picturebooks in the context of the classroom community, we need to consider the nature of traditional storytelling, in terms of text, context for telling, survival and transmission of stories and their power to transmit culture and provide excellent ground for cross-cultural comparison.

Traditional storytelling, given its absence of illustrations, might seem very different from reading picturebooks to children, but it is not in many ways, and most of all it does not need to be. The book and the images will still be there, but the more we look into it, the more we will realise that the really effective stories are the ones that reproduce oral narrative devices; not just in terms of structures and themes, but also because of that particular dimension—far closer to the context of traditional storytelling than of reading—which they require in order to be well understood and appreciated.

Consider for example that children confronted with a foreign language need the help of the teacher/performer to understand the foreign words, but also the help of peers: members of the group help each other interpret the story and this is of utmost importance for FL learning. Understanding meaning is the fruit of the interrelation between words, teacher's input, peers' reactions, but also memory of all the stories told before, which will form the basis for understanding the ones that will come. Traditional narrative relied on the collaboration between a teller and an audience who knew each other well, which allowed the teller to narrate the right stories at the right moment. Similarly, a classroom is a tight community and the teacher knows her/his pupils well. Telling a story in the classroom resembles to a great extent the dynamics of traditional community storytelling, where the storyteller/teacher chooses stories for the group/classroom interpreting the needs of the group and keeping an eye on all of them, thus adapting the narration to their reactions. This interplay between community, the present time of performance, and knowledge that comes from the past is at the heart

of traditional storytelling which is definitely about the re-enactment of the past in presently meaningful ways.

To paraphrase Vygotskiĭ, we need to understand the interfunctional relation of story and language (Vygotskiĭ, 2012). Words and sentences in stories cannot be understood as words in a dictionary. They are not carriers of a general meaning, they exist in relation to the words spoken before and after, and also in relation to the words that do not need to be spoken, because teller and audience have a mutual knowledge that does not need to be made explicit. Words in stories are carriers of thoughts, they carry fragments of thoughts and at times complete ones, and thanks to them we can retrieve thoughts and mental images linked to the stories. Understanding the relationship between language and oral narratives is essential to an understanding of how using stories, even those in books, can help children acquire a language in lasting and meaningful ways and also in emotionally productive ways. But an oral narrative is not just a text. Its words exist and acquire meaning because of how they are spoken, who they are spoken by and for whom. In other words, a folk narrative is an interactional act that acquires real meaning at the moment it is told, and we will return to this point in detail later in this chapter.

## **Storytelling: the most ancient form of teaching**

We often hear storytelling defined as the most ancient form of teaching, but how does this work? For a story to transmit any kind of teaching and value it has to be first of all understood and internalised. Oral narratives had to be understood on the spot and remembered in order to survive and be passed on. And to be remembered at each telling, they had to be *retrievable*. For a story to be internalised, the message is not enough: there need to be specific stylistic features too. All narrative elements work together and act upon the listeners' feelings, senses, imagery, and linguistic skills, all at the same time. Plot, narrative structure, language, rhythm: all these features contribute to make a story unforgettable and retrievable.

What follows is based on two assumptions, from the point of view of language acquisition. First of all: if a story makes itself understandable and activates the story knowledge of the audience, then the language used to tell it will be more easily understood. Second: if a story is memorable, so will be the language used to tell it.

So why were traditional oral narratives memorable and what can they teach us about the use of picturebooks for EFL teaching and learning?

## Traditional Oral Narrative

Let us go back to the days when community storytelling was the main form of entertainment and social gathering, and let us take the figure of the experienced storyteller—his context for telling and his audience—as a guiding point in our exploration of the traits of traditional storytelling that are fundamental for understanding the role of narrative in EFL learning.

Skilled storytellers (particularly men in relatively large, public gatherings and women in smaller, domestic settings) had a prominent role in society; they were usually highly regarded, and people would look up to them and seek their advice on life matters. They knew their group, their community well and their gift with stories was in the service of the community. In this sense, teachers are similar to traditional storytellers, because unlike writers, they know their audience personally and well, they sit or stand in front of them, and among them, and they know the stories behind them.

In the days when storytelling was the main, if not the only, form of entertainment and privileged means of group interaction, people would come together in groups, in barns, around a campfire, and share the experience of telling and listening to stories. Many kinds of stories would be told, from personal narratives to legends, tales of magic, humorous narratives, anecdotes, etc., while men and women in the audience would carry on working, spinning<sup>1</sup>, etc. During those hours the tellers span a thick web of narratives which somehow catered to all human needs, from the need to learn from example to that of daydreaming a world where injustice was fought and vanquished and justice could prevail (Gatto, 2006). Sharing stories was the first form of group psychotherapy. Somehow stories, with all their different genres, swept all the little corners of the human mind and heart, leaving no feelings unattended.

Being able to tell the right story at the right time and in the right way was considered a vital skill, and those who could do it were admired. Storytellers chose stories according to their community's values, at times to reinforce them or, when necessary, to subvert or discuss them. Indeed, telling stories was a way of discussing shared worldviews, systems of beliefs and values. In the same way, teachers need to choose books that are functional for the class, not just in terms of the language they contain, but also in terms of content, considering the crucial role that emotions play in language learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The word “filò”, one of the words used in Northern Italy to refer to informal community gatherings where stories were told, comes from the verb “filare”, lit. “to spin”.

Interestingly, some of the most gifted storytellers studied by folklorists were also healers in their communities. This ties in very well with the widespread idea, shared by societies around the globe, that stories can save your life, which lies at the heart of contemporary studies on the therapeutic power of traditional narratives and fairy tales in particular (Ruini et al., 2014, 2017)<sup>2</sup>.

The storyteller had a rich repertoire he could choose from, stories he had learned orally most of the time and stories he had read and then transported back into oral tradition. The repertoire reflected his community but also his personal inclinations.

This leads us to three fundamental characteristics of oral narrative: stability, variation and adaptation. On the one hand, the storyteller is a tradition bearer and retells stories of the tradition largely as he has heard them, but to a certain degree he changes them with his artistry, partly to embellish them and make them more interesting, and partly to adapt them to the audience's needs and reactions during the performance.

As Honko says:

The word "variation" brings to mind the fact that variation is the life-blood of oral tradition. It is the main characteristic which differentiates oral culture from literary culture. Oral "works" are fluid, whereas literary works show a permanent form. In oral tradition, a single realisation of a theme can never claim the position of a master form which dominates over all other realisations of a theme or motif. During his/her performance career, a ballad singer or storyteller may be convinced that he/she has changed nothing in a song or story, yet variation creeps in all the time as the chain of performances continues. The performances are not identical, variation is constantly present and part and parcel of the oral composition itself, but the "thing" that varies remains a problem for the observing outside analyst. The performer may regard his last performance as the very best realisation and the "whole truth" of a theme, yet he will change many things, large and small, in his next performance. Flexibility rather than stability seems to be the key to the continuity of tradition, to the kind of "invariability" typical of oral tradition which prevents variation from going astray and distorting the song or story completely (Honko, 1998: 11).

Stories were adapted to the audience and folklorists have often collected very different versions of the same story within the space of the few meters

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<sup>2</sup> The idea that a well told story could save one's life returns in many stories and in many cultures: suffice to think of *Sherazad*, of the people who gathered in the *Decameron*, to run away from the plague, but also of all the fairy tales in which the hero who's been replaced or discredited by a false hero or villain can retrieve his freedom or have his life saved only when he's finally allowed to tell his story.

that separated one house from another. Honko speaks of “organic variation to be found not only in cohesive communities and social groups but also in cohesive regions where people sustain channels of communication and share tradition” (Honko, 1998: 11).

Variation is a result of time, but also of performance. A story exists in performance. A transcription of an oral text, as folklorists have long realised, is nothing without a knowledge of the context for telling the story and of the moment of the performance in general. For this reason, a traditional story is fluid and its definition is potentially open, as it is the container of all its possible versions, told by different people in different places.

In the same way, the teacher can add, implement, explain and add mystery with her voice, gestures and use of props. Even when s/he sticks to the printed text of the picturebook, no performance will be like the other. As she continues and expands her repertoire, she will have more and more ways of creating connections for the students, adding context and relying on their accumulating story knowledge.

Indeed, the art of the storyteller must never interfere with the comprehension of the story, but must instead enhance comprehension. This means that the audience need to know what to make of the story. For this reason, for example, the storyteller has to stick to certain narrative structures, or recognisable narrative types, in order to maximise the audience’s potential for understanding. Indeed, a story exists when it is shared, and part of its meaning comes from how it is received and understood by the audience. This is why narrative structure and conventions are so important when we tell a story orally, because we need to give the audience a series of cues that make the story immediately comprehensible, for there can be no such thing as going back to a page and re-reading a sentence. For this reason, teachers must be careful to choose books that have narrative structures familiar to the children or easily comprehended, as shall be detailed later in this chapter and most fully in Chapter 3.

This takes us to a fundamental point in oral narrative: the audience must feel competent (Foley, 1995), so it has to recognise conventions and make predictions on the basis of a certain number of known elements, such as the general structure of a narrative, the themes, the internal grammar. Only then can the audience suspend disbelief, when required by the genre.

Opening remarks, from “once upon a time” to, “a friend of my wife’s told me that”, tell us that we are dealing with a fairy tale in the first instance and probably a contemporary legend in the second. The opening tells us what to expect from the rest of the story, so in the case of a fairy tale the audience will deem it normal to suspend disbelief, will not find it strange to

hear about supernatural beings, and will expect a happy ending. There is no such thing as a mixed up or post-modern fairy tale in the oral tradition. Such texts would simply cease to be understood as fairy tales and would be regarded as something else, maybe a parody. Indeed, people who used to listen to oral narratives had a very clear idea of how to classify stories: although they would not necessarily call them by the same names we use internationally, they knew very well how to group stories together according to their inner rules, structure and themes. And it is important to note that children who live in an environment where stories are told, develop the ability to group stories together and “they are sensitive to differences between different types of stories” (Kibbe et al., 2018: 1) from a very early age.

There is no such thing as a story without a listener who knows what to make of it, and this is most important in the choice of stories to tell the EFL primary classroom. This is fundamental in SLA. Children must feel competent, or better, the teacher has to do all in her power to make them feel competent, and this means choosing the right stories, drawing cross references among stories to provide a bedrock of narrative knowledge and then performing the stories in ways that clarify what is not already known. Exposure to similar stories will create competence, also because of the recurring words and phrases connected with the descriptions of objects and characters that are typical of a theme. If a theme is exploited in many versions, i.e. through picturebooks on the same theme, the children will find it easier to acquire the necessary vocabulary, and we will return to this in Chapter 6. All of this cross-referencing relies on children’s conceptual thinking and ability to discern similarities and differences and other kinds of relationships between objects and therefore words.

Storytellers also adapted stories with a view to stimulating identification, to allow the listeners to enter the story and relive their own tribulations and feelings through the safe distance of fiction (Ruini et al., 2014, 2017).

Stories planted a seed in people’s heart which had to be internalised and left to work within each person in individual ways. We can all find different messages in a story and they might vary over time. But the result of identification, from the point of view of language acquisition, was that the language of stories penetrated at a deeper level of the listeners’ minds. Stories generated thoughts that would accompany individuals throughout their lives. People exposed to oral narrative traditions often report going back to stories to question them, wondering what the protagonist of a certain story would do in a particular situation. By stimulating identification and empathy, the messages of stories and consequently the language used to convey those messages were more easily understood, remembered and



retrieved. This explains why stories open up such powerful emotional channels for learning, by working on empathy and emotional intelligence.

For this reason, a story needed to be understood and retained, so that it could continue working within the listener even after the first retelling, as the listener sort of replayed the story within his mind. As mentioned before, being understood, retained and eventually passed on were fundamental things for oral narrative, because contrary to a written narrative, a story could only survive in memory and in people's words (Nicolaisen, 1990).

Indeed, variability and adaptation were also very important in terms of the survival of stories. Consider a written text, such as a novel. It might receive no praise when published and be forgotten for decades, but then found again on a library shelf and appreciated by succeeding generations. This could not happen to an oral narrative. Because of the absence of a fixed and written text, its survival is strictly dependent on its relevance. If people like it, they will retain it and retell it, and the story will survive; if not, the story will soon disappear. It certainly has the capacity to adapt over time, but the capacity for adaptation rests on its relevance.

Narrative motifs might migrate and merge with other stories, but again this testifies to their power (see the pervasive presence of Cinderella motifs in contemporary romantic movies). Themes and narrative motifs survive if they are relevant. Stories exist in the first place to answer human needs, often universally shared needs. Stories address needs that have persisted over centuries, ultimately the need to make sense of our existence and the reality around us. Some narrative motifs and plots are engrained in us, as metaphors or reifications of feelings and sensations. Events and situations described in motifs are somehow standardised ways of conceptualising emotions and ideas (i.e. rather than saying that the hero feels out of place, thus describing a sensation in abstract terms, a traditional narrative will tell of the hero being rejected by everyone around him), and for this reason they keep resurfacing in all kinds of stories and literature, especially for children. Working with narratives that bear similarities with traditional narratives, in terms of narrative motifs and structure, means working with powerful material that has survived the test of time.

But relevance was not the only cause of survival. A story's survival also relied on a number of narrative constraints, on its internal grammar, its narrative structure and syntax: that is, it had to be told in a certain way in order to survive. Stories had to make sure they had a form that made transmission possible. Indeed, for a story to be understood, remembered and retold, it had to have a clear storyline, and a clear exposition of events. It also needed effective language with heightened pictorial power. On the one hand people depended more on their memory in the past, but on the other

they could rely on a great deal of infallible scaffolding embedded in the narratives they heard.

What follows will focus on such traditional narrative elements and constraints, for knowledge of them is essential to the choice of effective books for the EFL classroom, considering that picturebooks that retrace the internal rules of traditional narrative provide scaffolding for comprehension, memorisation and retrieval of meaning and sounds.

So, what are the main genres, structures, elements, and constraints that are of particular interest to SLA? As we begin looking more closely at traditional narrative elements, it is important to introduce some of the terms and concepts developed by folklorists.

## **Tale Types and Motifs**

Folktales are very similar across oral traditions. The same plots can be found in stories coming from very distant countries and cultures. As scholars, collectors and compilers of folk narrative anthologies—from the Grimm brothers in Germany to Joseph Jacobs in various English-speaking countries—began to realise these commonalities, they also felt the need to establish comparative criteria that could facilitate international communication amongst folk narrative scholars.

This perceived need led to a monumental work of consultation of folk narratives on the part of scholars such as Antti Aarne in Finland and Stith Thompson in the United States: from folktales, to fairy tales, legends, mediaeval exempla and animal tales, they and their teams of colleagues, surveyed a colossal number of narratives. After a number of publications by Aarne starting as early as 1910, the most notable results of this comparative work were two systems of classifications, published by Thompson. One was *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (1961), then revised by Uther, with the title *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography* (2004), which classifies the basic story plots by number from 1 to 2411, with many subtitles in between. The other, consisting of 6 volumes, was *The Motif-index of Folk-literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballad, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books and Local Legends* (1955).

A type is “a traditional tale that has an independent existence” (Thompson, 1946: 415). It is the general plot of a story, “a constant basic pattern associated with a larger or smaller group of closely related [tales]” (Lüthi, 1984: 420:175). Each type is numbered, because not in every culture a story has the same title, though it really sounds like the same story. So, for

example, the story we commonly refer to as Cinderella is type 510, or ATU (Aarne, Thompson, Uther) 510. What follows is its description on *The Types of International Folktales* (Uther, 2004):

**Cinderella** (Cenerentola, Cendrillon, Aschenputtel). A young woman is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters [S31, L55] and has to live in the ashes as a servant. When the sisters and the stepmother go to a ball (church), they give Cinderella an impossible task (e.g. sorting peas from ashes), which she accomplishes with the help of birds [B450]. She obtains beautiful clothing from a supernatural being [D1050.1, N815] or a tree that grows on the grave of her deceased mother [D815.1, D842.1, E323.2] and goes unknown to the ball. A prince falls in love with her [N711.6, N 711.4], but she has to leave the ball early [C761.3]. The same thing happens on the next evening, but on the third evening, she loses one of her shoes [R221, F823.2].

The prince will marry only the woman whom the shoes fits [H36.1]. The stepsisters cut pieces off their feet in order to make them fit into the shoes [K1911.3.3.1], but a bird calls attention to this deceit. Cinderella who had been first hidden from the prince, tries the shoe and it fits her. The prince marries her (Uther, 2004: 1:293–94).

Descriptions of types took into account all the versions known to the authors. We can all recognise the general plot of Cinderella, but we can also see some marked differences with the Disney film adapted from Perrault's (1993) version: there are three encounters with the prince, sometimes the encounter is not at a ball, but in church (this happens in some southern Italian and Japanese versions for example), and the magic helper is a general supernatural being, because it is not always a fairy. Some elements change according to cultures.

The letters and numbers we see in square brackets are *motifs*. A type is made up of motifs, “the smallest unit in a tale having a power to persist in tradition” (Thompson, 1946: 415), or in Lüthi's words a “plot kernel, a concrete pattern of events” (Lüthi, 1984: 420:169). Some simple tales, such as animal tales, are made of just one motif, but the longer tales, such as Rapunzel, “consist of many of them” (Thompson, 1946: 415).

Motifs are numbered and preceded by a letter, as we can see between square brackets in the type description. They can change slightly across cultures, so we could have a motif regarding recognition by glass slipper and another by golden sandal. Wild animals typically change, so in some cultures we often find bears featuring, rather than wolves. What matters is that they preserve their narrative function, in this case the function of recognition by some kind of object.

In comparative terms, this means that in the vast majority of cases, for genres that are widespread, there is no such thing as an Italian fairy tale or an English fairy tale, rather we must speak of Italian or English versions of an international tale. In most cases, we can find enough points in common across stories that we can speak of the same type of story. It also means that there is no “real” version of what we normally refer to as Cinderella in folklore, because a story is the set of versions of a Cinderella-like story, as told around the world. Potentially, that set is never-ending, as it contains all the versions we do not know and the ones that have not been told yet.

But what is most of interest to us is the variety of stories and versions that could be found in oral traditions across the world. The talented traditional storytellers were able to handle types and motifs, and use their artistry, while still allowing the audience to recognise the story. The children’s literature we will deal with in this book owes a lot to, and mirrors, traditional narrative, in terms of motifs, plots and entire types. This is one reason why it is important to reflect on the nature of traditional storytelling.

## **Main Genres of Oral Narrative**

To convey a sense of the variety of stories catalogued by *The Types of International Folktales*, I will quote below the most recent index:

### ANIMAL TALES

Wild Animals 1-99

The Clever Fox (Other Animal) 1-69

Other Wild Animals 70-99

Wild Animals and Domestic Animals 100-149

Wild Animals and Humans 150-199

Domestic Animals 200-219

Other Animals and Objects 220-299

### TALES OF MAGIC

Supernatural Adversaries 300-399

Supernatural or Enchanted Wife (Husband) or Other Relative 400-459

Wife 400-424

Husband 425-449

Brother or Sister 450-459

Supernatural Tasks 460-499

Supernatural Helpers 500-559

Magic Objects 560-649

Supernatural Power or Knowledge 650-699

Other Tales of the Supernatural 700-749

## RELIGIOUS TALES

- God Rewards and Punishes 750-779
- The Truth Comes to Light 780-799
- Heaven 800-809
- The Devil 810-826
- Other Religious Tales 827-849

## REALISTIC TALES (NOVELLE)

- The Man Marries the Princess 850-869
- The Woman Marries the Prince 870-879
- Proofs of Fidelity and Innocence 880-899
- The Obstinate Wife Learns to Obey 900-909
- Good Precepts 910-919
- Clever Acts and Words 920-929
- Tales of Fate 930-949
- Robbers and Murderers 950-969
- Other Realistic Tales 970-999

## TALES OF THE STUPID OGRE (GIANT, DEVIL)

- Labor Contract 1000-1029
- Partnership between Man and Ogre 1030-1059
- Contest between Man and Ogre 1060-1114
- Man Kills (Injures) Ogre 1115-1144
- Ogre Frightened by Man 1145-1154
- Man Outwits the Devil 1155-1169
- Souls Saved from the Devil 1170-1199

## ANECDOTES AND JOKES

- Stories about a Fool 1200-1349
- Stories about Married Couples 1350-1439
- The Foolish Wife and Her Husband 1380-1404
- The Foolish Husband and His Wife 1405-1429
- The Foolish Couple 1430-1439
- Stories about a Woman 1440-1524
- Looking for a Wife 1450-1474
- Jokes about Old Maids 1475-1499
- Other Stories about Women 1500-1524
- Stories about a Man 1525-1724
- The Clever Man 1525-1639
- Lucky Accidents 1640-1674
- The Stupid Man 1675-1724
- Jokes about Clergymen and Religious Figures 1725-1849
- The Clergyman is Tricked 1725-1774
- Clergyman and Sexton 1775-1799
- Other Jokes about Religious Figures 1800-1849
- Anecdotes about Other Groups of People 1850-1874
- Tall Tales 1875-1999

### FORMULA TALES

Cumulative Tales 2000-2100

Chains Based on Numbers, Objects, Animals, or Names 2000-2020

Chains Involving Death 2021-2024

Chains Involving Eating 2025-2028

Chains Involving Other Events 2029-2075

Catch Tales 2200-2299

Other Formula Tales 2300-2399

What follows is a brief list of succinct definitions of the genres we will mention more often throughout the book. For a more detailed description of folk narrative genres see Masoni (2013).

*Folktale*: a general term used in English to indicate tales from oral traditions. It might or might not contain magic and it includes very short narratives as well.

*Fairy tale or tale of magic*: these are the stories like Cinderella. Long tales which contain magic transformations, supernatural elements and a positive ending. They are set in an undefined space and time (“once upon a time in a faraway land...”), and their plot is usually built around a young hero or heroine who, following an initial problem, has to leave the parental home (or his/her comfort zone) and begin a (metaphorical) journey, during which he/she will have to perform three difficult tasks, in order to improve the initial situations.

*Novella*: a fairy tale without magic or supernatural elements. We will still find the general plot centred on social ascent, but the hero will not make use of any magic help.

*Chain tales and cumulative tales*: they are a type of formula tale built around the repetition of a number of (almost) identical narrative sequences of linguistic elements. Their plot is usually scant, but the interest lies in the recitation of the elements that compose the tale.

*Animal Tales*: a story with talking animals which does not have to, and most of the time does not, contain an explicit moral (unlike fables).

## Meaning, Themes and Structures

Much of the enjoyment we derive from a story is caused by the themes it develops. Kay Stone speaks of “the inherent timelessness of stories, a continuing relevance that goes beyond specific historical communities and individuals” (Stone, 1998: 130) and this is due to the fact that stories are centred around themes that are fundamental for humanity.

It is however crucial to differentiate between the concept of theme in oral narrative and how that theme is conveyed. As folklore scholar Max