Dramatizing folk tales for the EFL class

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Resumen

L A **D** RAMATIZACIÓN DE **C** UENTOS Y **L** EYENDAS EN LA **C** LASE DE **I** NGLÉS COMO **L** ENGUA **E** XTRANJERA

Este artículo ilustra con ejemplos cómo los profesores de inglés pueden mediante el uso de pantomima e improvisación involucrar a los estudiantes en el proceso de desarrollo y dramatización de leyendas para practicar las cuatro habilidades del lenguaje (comprensión, lectura, conversación y escritura), y promover la interacción de éstos en la lengua meta. Dos leyendas venezolanas utilizadas en un taller dictado en las XXIV Jornadas de ENDIL 2005 (Encuentro Nacional de Investigadores de la Lingüística) han sido utilizadas a manera de ejemplo para ilustrar el uso de este enfoque propuesto por el autor, en la clase de EFL (Inglés como Lengua Extranjera).

Palabras clave: *inglés, leyendas, historias, pantomima, dramatización.*

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Abstract

This article illustrates how EFL teachers, using pantomime and improvisation, can involve their students in the process of developing folk tales into dramatizations for practicing English in order to integrate the four skills of the language (listening, speaking, reading, writing), and promote students' interaction in the target language. The author conducted a workshop using this approach at ENDIL (Encuentro Nacional de Investigadores de la Lingüística) 2005 in San Cristóbal, Táchira. Two Venezuelan folk tales presented in this paper were used with the participants at the workshop. The author discusses the major pedagogical principles to take into consideration when implementing drama and pantomime in the EFL class.

Key words: *English as a foreign language, folk tales, stories, pantomime, dramatization.*

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Résumé

L A **M** ISE EN **S** CÈNE DES **C** ONTES ET **L** ÉGENDES DANS LE **C** OURS D'**A** NGLAIS **L** ANGUE **É** TRANGÈRE

Cet article illustre par des exemples comment les professeurs d'anglais peuvent, à travers l'utilisation de la pantomime et de l'improvisation inclure aux étudiants dans le processus de développement et de la dramatisation de légendes afin de mettre en pratique les quatre compétences du langage (compréhension écrite et orale et production orale et écrite) et promouvoir leur intéraction avec la langue cible. Deux légendes vénézuéliennes utilisées dans un atelier lors du XXIV ème «jornadas de Endil 2005» (Rencontre Nationale de Chercheurs de la Linguistique) ont été utilisées comme des exemples pour l'utilisation de cette approche dans la classe de EFL (anglais langue étrangère).

Mots-clés*: anglais, légendes, histoires, pantomime, dramatisation.*

E X P E R I E N C I A S

1. Teaching English through stories and folk tales

Most second language teaching materials include dialogs to illustrate how idiomatic expressions and language patterns are used, so it is a small step to make these dialogs follow story lines that will be interesting and perhaps even familiar to the students. Familiar stories and folk tales provide a wealth of material for creating dialogs that will engage the students' imaginations as well as their language skills and also encourage them to participate in the learning process.

Teaching English through stories and folk tales is a way to engage students in the learning process by having them work out the actions of the stories in pantomime. I use this technique with my theatre students as a way of fleshing out brief folk tale narratives for presentation dramatically, but I believe the process is applicable in the EFL classroom also. It is especially useful as a way of preparing students to understand the kinetic as well as the phonetic qualities of language. Physical movement is a part of the communication process, and separating the emphasis on the physical from the verbal can be a way of heightening awareness of their interaction. In addition, physical representation can help language learners make cognitive connections as they enact the contexts for the words they will speak.

2. Pantomime of folk tales and stories

The process in which I engage my theatre students begins with an overview of a story (a brief narrative), so the students have the main events in mind. Then I divide the class into groups to work on finding the physical actions that will «show» the story, without using any words. I encourage the students to pantomime the scenery as well as the characters' actions—so students might also become walls, doors, trees, caves, or whatever settings the story requires or suggests. After the groups work out their individual versions, they perform their pantomimes of the story for each other; and then we combine the best ideas for «showing» the story and arrange roles for everyone. The whole class is involved in showing the story. No props are used at this stage.

After this first stage, we add words to the action, improvising dialog among the characters and narrative explanations among those pretending to be scenery or props. The idea here is to expand the story—giving it the group's own slant by adding characters, adding or changing settings, and/or exploring unexplained or newly invented motives of the characters. After several improvisations and class discussions, I begin writing out the script, following the improvised actions and the dialog the students have invented for the story, but making sure that the levels of language in the conversations and narration are appropriate for the story and filling in any logical gaps.

I discovered during my sabbatical project in Malaysia that this process works across languages as well. At University Malaya, my students brought in their favorite stories in Malay. I translated their narratives into English—so I would understand them—but the students continued to work with the stories in Malay. After we worked out the pantomime actions for the stories, the students improvised dialog and narration in Malay for performance as Children's Theatre in local primary schools. Then, partly for the purposes of my sabbatical project and partly in response to requests from EFL teachers in the schools we visited, I translated the final results into English as well.

But in addition to the final product—the scripts for memorization and enactment—I believe the process of creating the scripts could be a useful part of an EFL class. The teacher and the students could bring in favorite stories and folk tales and work at first in pantomime to plan out the action of the stories. Then the students could be encouraged to use their first language to decide (with the teacher's guidance) what the characters should say to each other and what the narrators need to say to explain the transitions, even though they are being acted out. Finally the teacher could become the «translator/ playwright,» inserting the appropriate dialog and narrative in English for the students to «perform.»

3. An Example of the Process

The following section illustrates the stages I have described so far through a version of the process which I shared with the teachers and student attendees in a four-day workshop at the ENDIL

(Encuentro Nacional de Investigadores de la Linguistica) conference held in San Cristóbal, in October of 2005. The stories we worked on dramatizing were two Venezuelan folk tales, which I adapted from the retellings by John Bierhorst in *Latin American Folktales*. The first of these narratives—which the participants read, pantomimed, and enacted with my help as a facilitator[1]—was called «The Horse of Seven Colors,» a wide-ranging story, which I reduced somewhat in my adaptation.

3.1. Folk tale 1: The Horse of Seven Colors

A man with three sons had a wheat field that was being raided night after night. He decided his sons should be watchmen, and sent the eldest son first. But the eldest son dozed off during the night, and once again the field was torn up. The second son fared no better.

The youngest son had to beg his father for the chance to be the watchman, but he prepared himself with a hammock full of pins and a guitar. When he went to the field, he strummed the guitar to stay awake, and when he fell back into the hammock to sleep, the pins woke him up again.

Just before daylight, he saw something moving about in the wheat field—he threw a lasso around it and pulled it to him. It was a little multi-colored horse, which looked at him mournfully and begged not to be killed. «I am the Horse of Seven Colors. If you let me go, I will help you whenever you need me.» The boy was dubious, but the horse produced a small whistle with which he could be called if the boy were ever in need of help, and the horse promised to respond immediately. So, the boy untied the rope and let the horse go.

When his father saw that the field had not been damaged that night, he praised his youngest son and scolded the older ones for their incompetence. Shamed, the older ones decided to leave home. As they saddled their horses to leave, the youngest begged to come with them, but they rode off without him. Undaunted, the youngest packed a lunch and set off after them on foot. He walked all day and all night, and at last caught up with them. They were not pleased to see him, but they did notice the pack of food that he carried. They took it from him, tied him up, and left him in the ditch beside the road.

After he lay in the ditch for most of the day, with no help in sight, the boy remembered the whistle given to him by the Horse of Seven Colors. He managed to wiggle the whistle from his pocket and maneuver himself to blow on it. Instantly, the Horse of Seven Colors appeared and freed the boy from the ropes. But the boy also wanted the horse's help in catching up with his brothers, so they went along the road in pursuit.

In the next town, it happened that the brothers had become engaged in a tournament, to win the hand of the local princess in marriage. Her father, the ruler of that province, had issued a challenge—any young man who could throw an apple from horseback onto the princess' balcony, striking her on the chest (her heart), would be married to her at once. All the young men in the area had come to try their luck, including the brothers. When the youngest saw the princess, it was love at first sight, and he determined to throw the apple as well. He reminded the Horse of Seven Colors of its promise of aid, and the horse assured the boy that his aim would be true.

And so it was that after all the others had failed, the youngest son won the hand of the princess in marriage. At the gala banquet in celebration of the event, he forgave his brothers for leaving him in the ditch and sent for his father, also, to live in the palace with him and his new bride. The Horse of Seven Colors, saying that his debt had been repaid, bid them all farewell and disappeared.

The participants worked in groups to establish the physical actions of the story, without words. They seemed to be more comfortable adapting objects in the rehearsal rooms to use as props than they were with merely pantomiming them. This proved to be just as useful as pure pantomime, suggesting that using some minimal props and costumes might be comforting for students in an EFL classroom as well. After the groups had performed their improvised pantomimes for each other and joined in a discussion of which physicalizations worked best for «showing» the story, I put together a script with dialog and narrations, making more of the characters in the story female to reflect the composition of the workshop—just as an EFL teacher might do to involve all members of a class.

Here is the script which evolved from the various pantomime «showings» of the story. Children #1, #2, and #3 could be given actual names, of course, and some of the longer Narrator speeches could be

shared by more than one narrator. Note that the script also includes a two-part «chorus» representing Night and Day, which could include any number of choristers—another way of involving more students in an EFL class:

Script for the Horse of Seven Colors

As I mentioned before, after the students do their pantomime and improvisation work with the story or folktale, the teacher acts as the «translator/playwright,» inserting the appropriate dialog and narrative in English for the students to «perform.» Below is the script I developed in the workshop, based on the participants' preparation work on *The Horse of Seven Colors.*

Narrator: A farmer, who had three children, was having a hard time with his wheat field. Someone—or something—was tearing it up every night. Soon there would be nothing left to harvest.

Farmer: I need someone to guard the wheat field at night. Child #1, that's your new job.

Child#1: Oh, no, Papa—I don't want to stay all night in the wheat field.

Farmer: It's time for you to take responsibility for the farm. Go to the wheat field tonight!

Narrator: And so Child #1 went to the wheat field that night. For a while, he was very watchful. But as the night wore on, Child #1 got more and more sleepy. Finally, he fell asleep.

Night Chorus: [*crossing the front of the stage*] We are Night. We are Night. We are passing by, and we'll see you all again tomorrow night!

Narrator: When he woke up in the morning, the field was damaged again, and he walked slowly home to tell his father.

Child#1: I tried to stay awake, Papa, but I couldn't.

Narrator: The father rushed to the field to see the damage, with the children following closely behind him.

Farmer: Ay-yi-yi! The field was damaged while you slept right next to it!

Child#2: [*laughs loudly*] Ha, ha, ha!

Child#1: Maybe Child #2 thinks she can do better.

Child#2: Oh, no—I don't want to stay all night in the wheat field either.

Father: Well, I want you to do it anyway—and stay awake!

Day Chorus: [*crossing the stage*] We are Day. We are Day. We are passing by, and we'll see you all again some other day.

Narrator: So, Child #2 went to the wheat field that night to protect it. But before very long, Child #2 became very sleepy, also. Gradually, she fell asleep.

Night Chorus: We are Night. We are Night. We are passing by, and we'll see you all again tomorrow night!

Narrator: When she woke up in the morning and saw that the field was damaged again, Child #2 walked slowly home to tell her father.

Child#2: Papa, I'm sorry, but the field was damaged again.

Father: What, again? Let me see.

Narrator: The father and his children went to the wheat field to survey the damage.

Child#2: I never heard anything.

Child#1: Probably because you were snoring so loudly.

Child#2: And were you such a perfect watchman?

Father: That's enough, you two.

Child#3: Let me try, Papa.

Child#1: What, you? Ha! That's a laugh.

Child#2: You're too young to stay out at night.

Child#3: Please, Papa?

Farmer: Oh, all right. You can't do any worse than your older brother and sister.

Child#3: Great! I just have to get some things ready.

Narrator: So the youngest child made preparations for staying all night in the wheat field.

Day Chorus: [*crossing the stage*] We are Day. We are Day. We are passing by, and we'll see you all again some other day.

Narrator: He found his guitar—to keep himself busy all night—and he put some pins in his blanket in case he might lie down to sleep. When he went to the field, the youngest strummed his guitar, and each time he lay down on the blanket to sleep, the sharp pins woke him up again.
[*Night Chorus and Horse try three entrances but stop each time the youngest wakes up again*]   Just before dawn, he saw and heard something moving in the wheat field.

Child#3: [*throws the rope lasso*] Aha! I've got you! [*Pulls on the rope*] Come over here

so I can see who you are!

Horse: Please, don't hurt me. If you let me go, I can help you out if you are ever in trouble.

Child#3: Why should I believe someone who is destroying our wheat field?

Horse: [*coming closer*] Because I am the Horse of Seven Colors, a magical horse. [*Chorus gasps*] I will appear immediately and assist you whenever you call me with this whistle.

Narrator: With a bow, the horse gave Child #3 a small whistle, and Child #3 decided to trust that the horse was telling the truth.

Child#3: I am going to set you free, but I will remember your promise.

Horse: Thank you for your trust. You will not be sorry. [*He gallops away*]

Narrator: When the horse had gone, Child #3 thought for a while before going home to tell his father about the wheat field. He decided not to mention the Horse of Seven Colors to his father or his siblings.

Night Chorus: [*crossing the stage*] We are Night. We are Night, finally passing by, and we'll see you all tomorrow night!

Child#3: Papa, I'm home—and the field is just fine!

Farmer: Whaaat? Let me see! [*They all run to the field*]

Child#1: How did you manage that, you little twerp?

Child#2: Don't tell us you actually stayed awake all night.

Child#3: I actually stayed awake all night.

Child#2: I asked you not to tell us that!

Child#1: I suppose you think you are pretty smart!

Farmer: Enough! Let's all be thankful that the wheat field is safe. It's time to take some of the wheat to the market to sell. [*He goes off with some wheat*]

Narrator: But the older two were ashamed of their failure, so they decided to leave home.

Child#1: Well, I'm not staying around here.

Child#2: Me, neither. Let's saddle our horses and go as soon as possible.

Child#3: Wait for me! I just have a few things to get ready.

Child#1: Yes, you always have «things to get ready.»

Child#2: Forget it! Stay at home and be «Papa's boy.»

Narrator: And they rode away without the youngest, who was busy preparing food, finding a rope and a blanket—one without pins—and also his magic whistle, in case he needed to call the Horse of Seven Colors. He walked all day [*Day chorus*] and all night [*Night chorus*] to catch up with his older brother and sister.

Child#1: Can you believe it? The little twerp caught up with us.

Child#2: It looks like he has some food, too. We could use that. [*they grapple with him*]

Narrator: They took the food from Child #3 and tied him up with the rope he had brought. Child #3 lay in the ditch beside the road for a long time, with no help in sight. At last, he remembered the magic whistle, and he managed to wiggle it from his pocket and blow on it. Instantly, the Horse of Seven Colors appeared and freed him from the ropes.

Child#3: Come on, Horse. Help me catch up with my siblings. [*they follow the siblings*]

Narrator: Soon they came to the public square in a large town, where the local ruler was making a proclamation.

King: Whichever of you fine young men can toss this apple over my daughter's balcony, through her window—and onto her heart—will be engaged to marry her immediately.

Narrator: When Child #3 saw the princess, he fell in love with her instantly, and he eagerly joined in the contest.

Child#3: Remember, Horse, you said you would help me.

Horse: No problem! Just concentrate and your aim will be true.

Narrator: All of the others failed to throw the apple well. [*Several try and fail*] But Child #3 was right on target, [*much cheering*] and the king arranged a great banquet to celebrate the marriage. Child #3 forgave his siblings and called for his father to come and live in the palace with him and his new bride. [*the horse pushes his way through the ongoing party*]

Horse: I have repaid my debt, so I will be on my way. Good-bye!

Bride: Oh, good-bye, pretty horse. [*To Child #3*] Husband, do you know this horse?

Child#3: Yes, it's a long story. You see… *[They*

walk away together, talking quietly]

Narrator: The Horse of Seven Colors disappeared. But the celebration went on for several days.

Day/Night: [*crossing the stage together*] We are Day. We are Night. We are passing by, and we'll see you all some other time.

This section presents the second folk tale we used in the seminar to give participants more opportunities to practice the process of dramatizing and improvising folk tales. In adapting «The Clever Fox» from Bierhorst's retelling, I took the liberty, especially, of making the ending more upbeat than his «Good Is Repaid with Evil.»

3.2. Folk tale 2: The Clever Fox

One day a man and his son came upon a snake which had been trapped under a fallen tree branch. The snake asked for help, but the father cautioned the boy not to help—for the snake would no doubt bite them when it was free. The boy freed the snake anyway, and, as the father had feared, the snake rushed at them to bite them. The father shouted for the snake to stop and consider that the boy had just helped him out of a predicament, but the snake replied that it was just repaying good with evil, like everyone else. A burro was passing by, and the father asked for its judgment in the case. The burro said that the snake should go ahead and bite them, since good is repaid with evil—that's the rule. The burro pointed out what had happened to him: after he had worked all his life for his master, the master stopped feeing him and threw him out. The father saw a horse coming down the road, so he hoped for a better judgment. But the horse had much the same opinion as the burro, and so did a dog which came along after that. The snake was again at the point of biting them, when a fox happened along, and the father made one last appeal—adding that he and his son were on their way home to a fine chicken dinner, at which the fox would be welcome. The fox asked for a re-enactment of the situation, cleverly persuading the snake to have the branch put back on top of it—so the fox could see «exactly» what had happened and make a «truly impartial» judgment. When the snake was under the branch once again, the man and his son took their new friend, the fox, home to enjoy that fine chicken dinner.

Script for the Clever Fox

Again, after the participants worked in groups to establish the physical actions of the story, I acted as the «translator/playwright,» with the help of professor Chacón, to develop the script for *The Clever Fox.* Here is the script which came out of their improvisations:

Narrator: One day a man and his child came upon a snake which had been trapped under a fallen tree branch.

Snake: Help me, please! Please, move the tree branch so I can be free.

Child: I'll be glad to help you out. [*starts to remove the branch*]

Father: No, no, child. Don't move that branch. The snake will bite us if you set it free. Never trust a snake.

Child: Don't be silly, Papa. The snake is in trouble and I'm going to help.

Narrator: The child freed the snake, and, just as the father had feared, the snake rushed at them to bite them.

Father: Stop! This child just helped you! Why would you attack when someone has done you a good deed?

Snake: Ha! I am just repaying good with bad—like everyone else.

Child: That's not true. Not everyone repays a good deed with a bad one.

Snake: Of course they do. You are just too young to know about the world.

Father: Wait! Let's ask someone else. We will find out whether they agree with your cynical view of the world.

Snake: Oh, all right, if you insist. But I think you will find that the rule is universal. Good is repaid with bad.

Child: Look, father, here comes a burro.

Burro: Hee Haugh! Hee Haugh!

Father: Pardon me, Burro, but we have a serious question to ask you. My child just did a good deed for this snake, but now the snake wants to bite us.

Child: Why not? Look at what happened to me. After I'd worked all my life for my master, he stopped feeding me and threw me out. Good is always repaid with bad—go ahead and bite, Snake.

Snake: There! You see? The burro agrees with me. Get out of my way, Burro.

Child: That poor burro has had a hard life.

Father: So, he is not an impartial judge. Let's find someone else.

Child: There's a horse coming down the path now, Papa.

Snake: I don't care if it's an elephant—let's get on with this.

Father: Pardon me, Horse, could we ask you a question?

Horse: Neighhhhh!

Father: My child helped this snake out from under a fallen branch, but now the snake wants to bite us.

Child: Do you think that's fair?

Horse: Why not? Look at what happened to me. After I'd worked all my life for my master, he stopped feeding me and threw me out. Good is always repaid with bad—go ahead and bite, Snake.

Snake: See? That's two for two. Get out of my way, Horse!

Child: Wait a minute. I see a dog coming this way.

Snake: Dog, Cat, Pig, Cow—how many times do you have to hear something before you believe it?

Child: Only once, if it's the truth.

Father: Maybe the dog will be a more impartial judge. Pardon me, Dog, may we ask you something?

Dog: Woof! Woof!

Father: My child just saved this snake's life, and now the snake wants to bite us.

Child: Does that sound fair to you?

Dog: Why not? Look at what happened to me. After I'd worked all my life for my master, he stopped feeding me and threw me out. Good is always repaid with bad—go ahead and bite, Snake.

Snake: OK, OK, I think I've heard enough of this. Out of my way, Dog.

Child: Is that a fox over there in the woods?

Snake: No more stalling!

Father: Hello, Fox. Please join us here. We want to ask you a question.

Fox: Yes, of course. But then I really must continue hunting for something to eat.

Child: Papa, we could have the fox join us for dinner tonight.

Fox: Did you say «dinner»? What's on the menu?

Child: Fried chicken, I think.

Fox: My favorite! Now, what was that question?

Father: Do you think it is fair when a good deed is repaid with a bad deed?

Fox: I'm not sure that I understand. Can you explain?

Father: My child helped this snake by removing a fallen branch that had trapped it. Now the snake wants to bite us.

Child: Does that sound fair to you?

Fox: Hmmmmm. This is a hard question. Maybe it would help if you could show me exactly what happened.

Snake: I thought foxes were supposed to be clever. Didn't the man just tell you what happened?

Fox: Well, yes, but I would rather see for myself. So, you were holding a fallen branch?

Snake: No, no, the branch was on top of me!

Fox: Where, exactly, were you?

Snake: [*the snake moves to the place*] I was right over here.

Fox: Now, Child, could you show me exactly where the branch was?

Child: It was right here on top of the snake. *[The child puts the branch back on the snake]*

Fox: Aha! I think I see, now.

Snake: So? Get that branch off of me!

Fox: No, I think this is a good conclusion.

Father: It seems fair to me. I think the snake has learned a lesson.

Child: And we can get home in time for dinner—if we hurry.

Fox: [*as they go out*] We're having fried chicken, you said, right?

Narrator: Thus, good is often repaid with good— especially if you serve fried chicken!

4. **Conclusion**

I have spoken about the process of developing the scripts from stories mostly from a theatrical point of view, but teachers can also be looking for ways to incorporate into their scripts patterns and vocabulary which might be part of their regular textbook or scheduled lessons. I would also suggest choosing stories with varying degrees of complexity

and formality of language, starting with the most basic. Teachers might create separate versions of some stories to provide their students with practice speaking English in a formal setting and also in an informal setting. A review of the grammar rules illustrated in the stories could then include substitution drills and other reinforcements of the patterns used in the dialog and narration.

The goal of creating the dramatizations is to provide practice in not only speaking but also enacting English. Such stories—having beginnings, middles, and ends—are generally more satisfying than unconnected dialogs for memorization, and dramatizations in class have the advantage of involving the students in the learning process as well as helping them gain confidence in the give and take of conversation in English. Having the EFL class create their own slant on stories also guarantees that the dialogs will be fresh and new, and the process allows for incorporation of current events as well as traditional lore. I believe folk tale dramatization can be a very useful addition to the EFL teacher's tool box.

Notas

[1] My special thanks to Professor Carmen T. Chacón, who graciously acted as my Spanish translator and assistant in the workshop.

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