



INTEGRATING FOLKTALES INTO THE TEACHING OF WRITING AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF NAGALAND

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Abstract: This paper presents a discourse on the utilization of folktales as a means to enhance writing skills and preserve cultural heritage. Built on the premise that writing is a skill that students need to be equipped with, the paper has highlighted the contextual needs that calls for writing instructions to be in close alignment with students' cultural backgrounds. It has explored the integration of Naga folktales into undergraduate writing instruction in Nagaland, uncovering a range of benefits that resonate with both creative and cultural dimensions.

Key Words: Folktales, writing, pedagogy, integration

INTRODUCTION

For generations, the people of Nagaland have cherished the art of passing down wisdom, history, and values through the lyrical narratives of their folktales. This longstanding tradition, deeply ingrained in the fabric of Naga society, not only perpetuates ancestral legacies but also fosters a sense of communal belonging and identity. The Naga folktales, with their diverse genres like myths, legends, and folk songs, serve as bridges between generations, transcending time and space to communicate the essence of Naga heritage. Beyond their mere entertainment value, these narratives are vessels of cultural values, encapsulating the worldview, ethics, and ethos of the Naga people. All these folklore and folksongs have played a significant role in their everyday life that depicts a symbiotic relationship between men and nature (Martemjen, 2014).

In a rapidly changing world, where modernity often overshadows tradition, the preservation of Naga folktales becomes an endeavor of paramount importance, safeguarding the essence of Naga identity. As Naga society navigates the delicate interplay between tradition and progress, a new educational dimension emerges—one that seeks to blend the wisdom of the past with the skills of the present. Within such a backdrop, this paper embarks on an exploration of the harmonious integration of Naga folktales into writing instruction, envisioning a pedagogical approach that not only enhances writing skills but also kindles the flames of cultural pride. It explores the potential of Naga folktales to foster improved writing competencies while nurturing a sense of cultural awareness among the young generation.

WRITING SKILLS AND NAGA EDUCATION

In the domain of education, the mastery of writing skills holds pivotal significance academically as well as professionally. In both the contexts, writing well corresponds with success. Writing serves as the bridge between thought and expression, enabling students to communicate their ideas coherently and persuasively. Moreover, in the digital age, written communication transcends physical boundaries, connecting learners to diverse cultures and perspectives worldwide. This calls for the need to prepare students with efficient writing skills. However, the path to developing proficient writing skills is not devoid of challenges. Undoubtedly, mastering writing is a highly difficult task for learners, making it a skill that merits thorough comprehension. In the words of Kellogg (2001), writing stands as a significant cognitive challenge, encompassing a simultaneous assessment of memory, language proficiency, and thinking capacity. Basturkman and Lewis (2002) in the same light, emphasize that writing, as a productive skill, places substantial demands on individuals. The hurdles faced by learners in the realm of writing are substantial. Acknowledging this challenge has also been one factor that spurred the need of this paper.

In the Nagaland context, undergraduate students are expected to express their thoughts using their own words, considering that their previous education has equipped them for higher learning. However, the present state of affairs is disconcerting, with numerous undergraduates across Nagaland's colleges struggling to articulate their ideas effectively in written form. Instead, they often rely on provided notes from instructors. These students tend to memorize and regurgitate these notes during exams. The predominant mode of writing in most Nagaland undergraduate classrooms involves students transcribing notes given by their teachers.

Aligning this situation with the challenges that await students beyond their education, the critical necessity to cultivate writing skills in preparation for their future becomes glaringly apparent. This is where this paper positions itself: an exploratory study aimed at investigating whether the abundant wealth of Naga folktales can serve as a motivating force, spurring students to enhance their writing proficiency.

FOLKTALES AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL FOR WRITING ENHANCEMENT

Folklore, encompassing a wide spectrum, comprises legends, superstitions, songs, narratives, proverbs, and traditional wisdom, among others (Barua 1999). These expressions manifest as folk songs, proverbs, myths, and folktales. Embedded within these narratives lies the profound cultural legacy of the Nagas, meticulously safeguarded. These stories and folktales serve as repositories of immense significance to the Nagas, woven into the very fabric of their identity, preserving their societal structure. These folktales, deeply woven into the fabric of Naga culture, offer a unique dual function: not only do they exhibit the richness of Naga cultural heritage; they can also be utilized as facilitators for enhancing language skills such as reading and writing.

In the global domain of language teaching as well, there is a growing trend in exploring the use of folktales as a resource for teaching language skills. In the first place, Ragan (2009) highlighted that using folktales in the reading classroom exposes students to distinctive opportunities for educational, intellectual, cultural and linguistic development. In the same light, Mantra & Kumara, (2018) also opined that folktales can be used in the reading classroom to enhance language skill, motivate students, and increase their cultural awareness. They further highlighted that they can help students develop positive attitudes towards reading and may develop extensive reading skill. Evasanti (2009) in another study explored how folktales can be used to develop the vocabulary of students. Nur (2017) in a quasi-experimental study investigated whether folktales can successfully enhance students' writing skills. The study revealed that the use of folktale as a resource for teaching writing was perceived as fun and engaging by students while also pointing out that the students were more expressive in their writing.

AN ACTUAL CLASSROOM ACCOUNT OF INTEGRATING FOLKLORE IN THE WRITING PEDAGOGY IN AN UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM IN NAGALAND

In this section of the paper, a detailed classroom illustration is provided, showcasing a real-life case of how a Naga folktale was effectively employed to inspire students in their journey toward enhancing their writing capabilities. Specifically, the chosen Naga folktale is titled "*The Magical Stone at Khezhakeno*," sourced from an assortment of folktales submitted by students as part of a narrative competition hosted at Capital College of Higher Education in Kohima. This compilation, known as the "*Anthology of Folktales*," was

subsequently published by the Research Cell of the College. It may also be mentioned that the narrative was contributed by a student named RhoveluSoho. This section delves into the classroom experience, elucidating how this specific folktale was utilized to ignite students' enthusiasm and proficiency in writing.

The Magical stone at Khezhakeno

In a village called Khezhakeno, under Phek District, there was a strange big stone which lay in the middle of the village. At first no one knew what the stone was or its magical powers. One day, a lady farmer ventured to lay her harvested wheat upon the stone to dry, and upon returning to gather it, she was astounded to find that her wheat had multiplied into two overflowing baskets of wheat.

Soon the villagers began to know about the stone and stories about how farmers began to harvest a houseful of wheat spread. The villagers one after another began to dry their wheat on the stone, some rushed for their turn while some even began to argue for their turn. This kept going on every day. People refused to go to the fields and planned to dry their wheat upon the magical stone. And no one had the idea to stop them from quarreling.

One day an old man came up with an idea to stop the villagers from fighting over the stone. So he decided to burn the stone, he laid some thatch and some firewood in the middle and burned the stone. And suddenly the stone broke into two parts bringing about the death of the magic stone.

Subsequently, the villagers settled back into their routine existence. Conversations about the stone began to fade. Presently, the stone stands enclosed by a protective fence. The intrigue surrounding the magical stone has waned among the villagers; however, it remains a pilgrimage site for outsiders who perceive its lingering enigma.

THE WRITING TASK

Based on the folktale presented here, the students were asked to write an alternative ending to the folktale. The prompt that was supplied to the students is as below;

You have been captivated by the Naga folktale "The Magical Stone at Khezhakeno." While the original ending holds its own charm, you now have the opportunity to exercise your creative prowess by crafting an alternative ending for this intriguing tale. In doing so, you will delve into the realm of imagination and explore how altering the story's conclusion can reshape its impact and meaning. This task aims to not only showcase your narrative inventiveness but also to provide a fresh perspective on a timeless narrative. As you write your alternative ending consider the following:

- a) Familiarize yourself with the events that lead up to the existing conclusion
- b) Consider how the story might have evolved differently.
- c) Think about how this change will impact the moral of the story, and the overall cultural essence of the tale. Consider how your rewritten ending preserves or transforms the cultural aspects present in the original folktale.
- d) As you craft your new ending, ensure that it flows smoothly from the events preceding it.
- e) Write your alternative ending with clear and descriptive language.
- f) Conclude your written piece with a reflective paragraph where you discuss your creative process, the challenges you faced, and the insights you gained through this exercise.

STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS

Below are some sample responses elicited from students based on the writing experience;

Rewriting the story's ending was very challenging and a difficult one. I had some problems of how to start it but as I began to write, my imaginations began to flow and I enjoyed the writing. I learned the elements of story writing through this task (Student 1)

The writing task is not easy but very fun. The most difficult part of this task for me was to maintain the cultural value alongside the freedom that I had with the wings of my imagination. As difficult as it was it helped me think about the cultural values of our people and try to bring them in my version (Student 2).

I never thought that I could write a story but this task allowed to try it and I now see that I can perhaps be able to write if I try. The most entertaining part of this writing task was that I am from the same village so I enjoyed reading it and writing it in my own style (Student 3)

DISCUSSION

Engaging in the task of rewriting and reimagining the ending of the folktale yielded valuable benefits for the students. As they delved into this creative endeavor, their imaginative faculties were ignited, leading to the discovery that once they began writing, ideas flowed more effortlessly. Beyond mere creativity, the exercise enabled a hands-on understanding of essential story elements, refining their skills in plot development, character portrayal, and narrative structure. This task also fostered the art of striking a balance between preserving cultural values and embracing creative freedom, showcasing their sensitivity to both authenticity and innovation. Despite its challenges, students found joy in the process, and even those who initially doubted their writing abilities gained newfound confidence. Their connection to the story was often deeply personal, with the task allowing them to infuse their own experiences into their narratives. Moreover, rewriting the ending expanded their perspectives, encouraging critical thinking and reflecting on storytelling choices. This exercise not only deepened their cultural awareness but also unveiled untapped potential for future writing endeavors.

CONCLUSION

The reflections provided by the students underscore the transformative impact of this approach. The task not only bolstered their confidence in writing but also inspired them to embrace the inherent complexities of cultural adaptation within a creative context. The convergence of personal engagement, creative exploration, and cultural preservation encapsulates the profound value of integrating folktales into writing instruction. Moreover, this study illuminates the potential for such pedagogical strategies to transcend cultural boundaries, as folktales possess a universal appeal and capacity to engage learners from diverse backgrounds. As educators and students continue to navigate the intricate realm of language acquisition and cultural heritage preservation, the integration of folktales emerges as an inspired conduit for fostering critical thinking, nurturing creativity, and instilling a deep-rooted appreciation for the tapestry of human stories. Ultimately, this paper illuminates the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, narrative and identity, making a compelling case for the enrichment of pedagogical practices through the timeless wisdom of folktales.

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