Chapter 18

Fairy Tales and ESL Texts: An Analysis of Linguistic Features Using the Gramulator

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a study that investigates the potential value of using traditional fairy tales as reading material for English language learners (ELL). Using the computational textual analysis software, the Gramulator, the authors analyzed the linguistic features of fairy tales relative to a corpus of ELL reading material and a corpus of baseline educational texts for native English speakers. The results of the analyses suggest that there are significant similarities between fairy tales and ESL texts, but differences lie in the content of the text types, with fairy tales appearing significantly more narrative in style and ESL texts appearing more expository. The study has important implications for educators and materials developers in the field of English as a Second Language.

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even “Indonesian” and the ubiquity, relevance, and interest in fairy tales becomes incontestable. As such, we argue here that educators might consider using these texts when teaching English as a Second Language (ESL).

Because we argue that ESL students could benefit from becoming familiar with and/or being able to reference fairy tales, it is necessary to discover whether ESL students are potentially capable of comprehending the language in fairy tales or using these texts as primary or supplementary reading material in their education. As such, we conducted the current study to address the following question: Are the linguistic features of traditional fairy tales sufficiently similar to standard ESL texts to have the potential to be used as material for language learners? The study examines reading material that ESL students are already likely to receive as compared to readings more often used with native-language students. The purpose of study is to facilitate the development of ESL supplementary material that can be used to help increase student motivation in reading and identification of features specific to text types.

We know of no other study that specifically looks at fairy tales compared to existing ESL texts; however, there are a variety of studies that look at the positive effects of using fairy tales in the classroom. For example, Davidheiser (2007), Fakharzadeh and Rasekh (2010), among others, advocate using fairy tales because students can identify with the characters and issues in the tales. Haulman (1985) supports the use of fairy tales because they provide language instruction through reading. They are also an important way for students to glean cultural information from reading material. Additionally, Peltzman (1994) encourages educators to use storytelling to engage students in reading and learning, while Hoewisch (2001) uses fairy tales to help students improve their writing skills.

The role of schema is also an important part of this study. Schema help students process information and construct understanding from previous knowledge. Carrell (1983), Al-Issa (2006) and Zhang (2008) investigate the ways schema affect reading comprehension, noting that background and culture play an important role in understanding texts. Carrell (1983) reviews multiple studies on both formal and content schema, noting that using background building exercises is important to help students improve comprehension. Al-Issa (2006) concludes that the closer passages relate to students’ cultures, the better their comprehension of the text, and that ESL students have difficulty activating appropriate schema. Zhang (2008) tests Chinese students’ understanding of multiple types of schema through a Cloze test, determining that teachers need to be aware of formal schemata in the texts they use for their classes as it affects students’ recall.

This study is of importance to educators in the field of ESL. Students need to read motivational and comprehensible material that will help them improve their English. With this in mind, we must recognize the breadth of appeal, the familiarity, and the palatability of fairy tales. We can also note that fairy tales are narratives, and that narrative texts are the default form of reading material. As such, students of the English language may be well-served by exposure to this familiar form of material (McCarthy, Myers, Briner, Graesser, & McNamara, 2009). Additionally, content-based instruction is becoming an important part of the classroom setting (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Kasper, 2000) and using fairy tales in the ESL classroom, students are exposed to the language and culture simultaneously during their readings and discussions. In sum then, fairy tales would appear to be both accessible and associated with advancing literacy skills.

The consideration of adopting and adapting fairy tales for an ESL environment seems worthwhile. However, potential problems also need to be investigated. For example, fairy tales are likely to contain low frequency vocabulary (e.g., witch, spell, enchanted) and the nature of the fairy tale structure may also be sufficiently distant from