

Integrating folktales into English pedagogy: A pathway to value-based education in technical institutes

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Abstract: In a time when the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes value-based education and learning from our tradition, the English syllabus of B. Tech students in most of the Engineering colleges in India, including IITs and NITs, includes only Communicative English. The literary portion is generally missing in the syllabus, with no trace of folktales. This paper explores the scope of folktales in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms of Engineering colleges, where if the teacher dexterously uses these tales, will not only make the class interesting and learner-centered, but could also impart values like non-violence, love, compassion, empathy, spirit of service, respect for others, liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice which are essential in addition to the technical knowledge to aid holistic growth of students. After critically analyzing a tale from A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*, and by suggesting application of a few tasks and activities to it during the pre-, while-, and post-teaching stages, the paper concludes with the demonstration of intensity and extent of a short tale in imparting value-based education in the language classroom of B. Tech students in technical institutes.

Keywords: folktales, value-based education, NEP 2020, English Language Teaching (ELT)

Introduction

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge: pure and proud. Proud knowledge is the one that helps in material development, with the help of which we have been able to reach other planets. Pure knowledge is that which helps in spiritual development. It helps us realize that we are all essentially the same,

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and that's why we ought to live harmoniously and peacefully. Bacon advocates for the blending of these two for the advancement of society. History has been witness to the fact that one-sided inclination towards material development at the cost of spiritual one has always led to a turmoil in society which can be seen in literary voices - be it Elizabethan period, where the pride of Dr. Faustus brings him to doom (Marlowe 2018); Victorian period, where Arnold (1867) laments over the dryness of 'sea of faith' in 'Dover Beach'; or Modern period, which, according to Eliot (1922) has become a wasteland in the poem 'The Wasteland' due to spiritual paralysis. In the contemporary period, too, due to one-sided development, we humans have reached Mars, but have moved away from ourselves, the consequence of which can be seen in the form of loss of human values, which has led to senseless wars and irretrievable eco-damage. Current examples are wars taking place in the world, causing the death of innocent children and women, and the hypocrisy of many nations, which instruct developing nations to cut carbon emissions while they themselves are the highest emitters (Worldometer 2022) in terms of per capita emissions and total emissions.

The loss of values gives birth to vices like selfishness, greed, pride, jealousy, anger, lust etc., which manifest themselves in many unwanted forms and heinous crimes like Sheen Bora Murder Case (Ali 2015) in which a highly ambitious lady strangulates her own daughter to death to hide her illicit relationship with another person; increasing number of old-age homes, in which well-educated, but selfish and greedy children abandon their old parents in old-age homes after taking their thumb prints on property paper (Dua 2022); cases of molestation and sexual assault in which well-educated and renowned personalities fall prey to their lust. These incidents clearly indicate that a valueless education leads to a person becoming highly selfish and a 'slave to one's senses,' unable to transcend their narrow perspective and view the world from a broader one. That is why the United Nations' Global Citizenship Education (GCED) is one of the thirty-three cross-cutting issues of the seventeen sustainable development goals of UNESCO, where the focus is on making global citizens who are empathetic and take the whole globe as their family. That is why the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) also places significant emphasis upon value-based education, for children are the future of the nation and the whole world.

However, in engineering colleges in India, particularly in IITs¹ and NITs², B. Tech students are taught only a communicative English course, apart from their technical subjects, throughout their entire program. Although English literature, along with psychology, philosophy, economics, and others, is available as an elective in a few IITs³, the course is not compulsory, and learners are taught letter writing, report writing, grammar, phonetic transcriptions, etc., as prescribed in their syllabus. The absence of a literary portion, particularly folktales, from the syllabus is likely to make the course dry, leading learners to study solely for the sake of passing the exam. In light of the favorable outcomes of previously conducted studies, this paper explores the scope of folktales in the English syllabus of B. Tech students in technical institutes. These short traditional stories are rich in theme and wisdom, and have ample scope for working upon the socio-emotional understanding of students who, during their initial college period, cross the threshold from adolescence into adulthood. The paper discusses various values and highlights their importance in fostering the holistic growth of students, which is the need of the hour. Then it talks of folktales, their types, and relevance in language classrooms. Finally, the paper presents a critical analysis of a tale, demonstrating how tasks and activities can be applied to it during the pre-, while-, and post-teaching stages, to show the utility of a one-page story in a language classroom.

Literature review

Folktales, which relate to everyday reality to give a picture of their contemporary period, are oral narratives passed on from generation to generation (Mahanand 2021). Irrespective of the different periods and geography people belong to, human nature is likely to remain more or

¹ See Curricula Subjects, English, HSI-101Softskills.pdf. Subject | Department of Humanities and Social Sciences: Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, EE-2024-Curriculum, IIT Indore Academic, CHE - Courses | Indian Institute of Technology (BHU).

² NIT Trichy - Curriculum & Syllabus, NIT Rourkela, B.Tech_Civil_Engineering-Curriculum-new-2024-25_2024-7-19-15-39-22.pdf. National Institute of Technology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (Academics and Time Table), Course_structure_and_curriculum_B.Tech_I_to_VIII_NEP_2020.pdf. Academics – VNIT NAGPUR HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES DEPARTMENT. <https://www.manit.ac.in/content/humanities-department>.

³ Department of Civil Engineering-IIT Madras, B.Tech 2024 Curriculum.pdf. BTech |Department of Applied Mechanics, Civil Department | IIT Bombay.

less the same; that is why many of the messages regarding human behavior and life in these tales seem timeless and universal, which makes them relevant even today. Moreover, short length, diverse themes, and symbolic richness of these tales make them suitable content to be used and discussed critically in the class at all levels. Previous works done on the use of folktales as material in class have shown that these stories are helpful not only in improving the language skills of students but also in enhancing their socio-emotional understanding by imparting valuable lessons.

Linguistic and structural analysis of traditional stories like folktales shows that these stories are capable of developing cultural understanding and can also be used as a pedagogical resource in language class (Lwin 2015). They can help enhance critical thinking and intercultural awareness of students in English Language Classrooms (Mahanand 2021). An experimental study conducted at IKIP Mataram (Indonesia) demonstrates that folklores contribute to students' moral development. It is also found that students majoring in Language and Literature tend to have a better quality of life than those in science (Warta 2012). Similarly, a significant change in the social intelligence of the technical college students of Delhi NCR is found after using short stories and poetry as an intervention (Manuel 2020). During COVID-19, social intelligence of learners is found to be enhanced with the use of folktales as a learning material in the class (Junaidim et al. 2022). These traditional stories also helped Polytechnique students write creatively (Pattnaik 2016). Experimental studies carried out at senior secondary level in a state board school of Maharashtra (Namdev 2016) and at secondary level in Bhutan find folktales to be effective in developing writing skills of learners (Wangchuk 2014). A critical analysis of the collected folktales of Bezbaroa, an Assamese writer, shows that the stories have many moral values worth assimilating (Gogoi 2017). A comparison and contrast of folktales from Russia and India shows that such tales broaden our outlook and reinstate the vitality of the human spirit by upholding universal values of life (De 2020). Finally, the use of folktales in class six shows that students manifest interest in tales and activities like discussion, critical reading and storytelling (Bosma 1981). In light of the above-mentioned studies, this paper aims at showing the utility of folktales in imparting value-based education in technical institutes of India in the present time.

The need of value-based education

The fundamental beliefs that motivate or guide attitudes and actions are called values. Values measure the importance of something, with the help of which the best actions to be taken and the best way to live are determined (Mintz 2018). These values may be moral, personal, cultural, social, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, democratic, etc. With the help of these, a person makes a distinction between what's right and what's wrong.

NEP 2020 also emphasizes value-based education. It states that students will be taught values such as non-violence, service, sacrifice, respect for all, respect for elders, respect for the environment, gender sensitivity, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, patience, tolerance, helpfulness, responsibility, equality, liberty, and fraternity from a young age (4.28). After imbibing these values, a person rises above their petty self and considers others before taking any action. Such a person is likely to become empathetic, considering both the short-term and long-term consequences of any action, and tries to avoid taking any action that is likely to cause harm to society, either directly or indirectly. That is the reason why value-based education is needed at the moment to help students become responsible citizens in the future.

Holistic growth and its importance in the current scenario

Holistic development is the social, emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual growth of a person. As a result of holistic development, a person knows how to keep oneself mentally and emotionally balanced in all situations and thus carries out one's personal and social duty honestly to contribute to the betterment of society. But the rising number of suicides at top institutes like IITs, NITs, and IIMs raises questions over the nature of education being provided in these professional institutes. The Education Ministry told the Parliament in 2021 that 122 students from IITs, NITs, and central universities committed suicide between 2014 and 2021 (Radhika 2021). On August 7th, 2023, Subhas Sarkar, the Minister of State for Education, presented the data before the Parliament (AU2764). According to it, 32 students have committed suicide at various Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) from across the country since 2018. During this period, the National Institute of Technology (NITs) and Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) reported 22 and 4 deaths, respectively. The Minister presented academic stress, mental health, personal, and family reasons as some of the reasons behind the students' deaths. The above

data raises questions about our education system, highlighting that sufficient work is not being done on the socio-emotional development of students. Students admitted to these top institutes are among the country's finest young brains, yet they succumb to external circumstances. That is why holistic education is a must in today's time, so that students can be prepared to face all the crises of life in a calm and composed way. NEP 2020 also advocates for holistic education to develop all capacities of students- moral, emotional, social, physical, aesthetic, and intellectual in an integrated manner (11.3). In light of the above discussion, it can be said that value-based education is necessary to aid the overall development of students.

Relevance of folktales in English as a Second Language (ESL) Classrooms

Earlier, folktales were not available in written form, but later on, they were written and are now available in vernaculars and in the English language also. Along with fairytales, fables, and mythological stories, these tales form a part of our tradition. That's why these stories can also be called traditional stories (Mahanand 2021). Whereas folktales contain farmers, woodcutters, men, women, and objects of everyday life, which make them highly relatable for readers, fairy tales have a dominance of fantasy that may feature larger-than-life characters. Fables have animals and birds as characters, which symbolically represent some idea; and mythological stories have gods, goddesses, demons, etc., as characters (Ibidem). As such, there is no rigid parameter to divide these tales, but A.K. Ramanujan, in his book *Folktales from India*, has divided these stories into the following kinds: "Male-centered", "Women-centered", "Tales about families", "Tales about fate, death, gods, demons, ghosts, and so on", "Humorous tales", "Tales about animals", and "Stories about stories".

In these tales, we can find the reflection of almost all the sections of society. Marginalized people- women, children, or people belonging to the lower class or caste- are also given a voice in them. Thus, their cultural relatability, short length, simple language, and diverse themes make them a suitable material to be used in class for enhancing students' critical thinking and endowing them with valuable lessons. NEP 2020 also says that India's cultural wealth should be preserved and promoted for the identity and economy of the nation (22.1). That is why the use of these traditional stories in class is likely to strengthen students' sense of identity and pride in their culture.

Given below is a tale, 'Tell It to the Walls' from Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*, with its two very important and relevant lessons for students.

A poor widow lived with her two sons and two daughters-in-law. All four of them scolded and ill-treated her all day. She had no one to whom she could turn and tell her woes. As she kept all her woes to herself, she grew fatter and fatter. Her sons and daughters-in-law now found that a matter of ridicule. They mocked at her for growing fatter by the day and asked her to eat less.

One day, when everyone in the house had gone out somewhere, she wandered away from home in sheer misery and found herself walking outside town. There she saw a deserted old house. It was in ruins and had no roof. She went in and suddenly felt lonelier and more miserable than ever; she found she couldn't bear to keep her miseries to herself any longer. She had to tell someone.

So, she told all her tales of grievance against her first son to the wall in front of her. As she finished, the wall collapsed under the weight of her woes and crashed to the ground in a heap. Her body grew lighter as well.

Then she turned to the second wall and told it all her grievances against her first son's wife. Down came that wall, and she grew lighter still. She brought down the third wall with her tales against her second son, and the remaining fourth wall, too, with her complaints against her second daughter-in-law.

Standing in the ruins, with bricks and rubble all around her, she felt lighter in mood and lighter in body as well. She looked at herself and found she had actually lost all the weight she had gained in her wretchedness.

Then she went home (Ramanujan 2008).

Emotions and thoughts have weight. They should be given a proper outlet as and when needed. If undesired emotions are subdued for a long time, they are likely to take a toll not only upon mental and emotional health, but also upon the physical health of a person, as is manifested by the 'gaining of weight' by the old widow, who is mistreated by her daughters-in-law and sons. In the present time, this concept of unburdening oneself by sharing one's thoughts and emotions is used as a therapy to deal with depression, trauma, and stressful situations.

The second relevant message regards *taking care of parents in their old age*. The misery of the old widow in the story is a true reflection of the treatment meted out to many old parents in our country. In today's time, when the nuclear family is in trend, cases of elderly parents left alone at home after their children settle outside are on the rise. Due to loneliness, such people fall into depression and other mental illnesses. Considering the rising cases of abandonment of old parents and mistreatment meted out to them, the government of India was

compelled to bring The 2007 Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (see Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, Legislations: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India), which empowers the senior citizens to get the property back from their children if they are not treated well in their old age (Isabella 2022). In light of the present dismal reality, this story could be a good material to conduct discussion and convey a positive message to students.

Below is a list of questions and activities that teachers can employ during the pre-, while-, and post-teaching stages when teaching the above-mentioned tale in a language class. These questions demonstrate the intensity and extent of such a short tale, revealing its broad scope in raising relevant socio-emotional issues within a one-hour class. These questions are drawn by the idea that ‘meaning-making’ is equally important as ‘given meaning’. These questions aim to make students struggle for meaning, enabling them to arrive at their own interpretations of what they comprehend.

Pre-teaching stage

To activate the learner’s background knowledge and arouse their interest in the tale, the teacher could ask the following questions. These questions will help generate discussion on the subject.

1. What do you do when you are very happy?
2. What do you do when you are very sad? Do you share it with anyone or keep it to yourself only? In each case, how do you feel?
3. How do you deal with your anger?
4. What do you understand by emotion?
5. How many of you have watched the movie *Baghban*, starring Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini? Do you think the treatment meted out to old parents by their children is right?
6. What do you understand by old-age homes?

In this phase, the teacher can provide the meaning of concepts that students might encounter in the story. For example, the teacher could explain the meaning of emotions and introduce the concept of ‘catharsis’ indirectly.

Whilst-teaching stage

The teacher should ask students to quickly read the text and answer one or two general questions, such as, “What is the central idea of the story?” After this, the teacher could conduct activities or take recourse to discussion, group work, or any other technique as per the need and

time available. It is at this stage that necessary concepts like Freud's "iceberg theory" and others can be taught.

Post-teaching stage

Some of the post-teaching activities which can be conducted for the story mentioned above are: 1. Writing activity: a) the teacher can ask the learners to write a letter to their friend describing their happiness after they qualified for the IIT entrance exam; b) students can be asked to describe their happiest moment in life by writing. And 2. Speaking activity: a) the students can be asked to come up with their opinion on what they would do if they found that some elderly parents are mistreated by their children; b) learners can be asked to share their opinion on old-age homes.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion and research already carried out with folktales in class, it can be concluded that folktales can be a very potent tool to be used in English language classrooms of technical institutes of India because of the following reasons:

1. Folktales are short in length, simple in language, diverse in theme, and rich in meaning. These qualities make these stories suitable for critical discussion in class, making the class engaging and activity-based, which otherwise may seem dry.
2. Folktales are rich in wisdom. That is why, by using the right method, students can be imparted the necessary values and many life lessons.
3. Since students entering college are just crossing the formative period of their lives, it is essential to utilize these tales to enhance their socio-emotional intelligence, thereby fostering holistic growth, which is the need of the hour.
4. Skillful use of these short stories could help the teachers achieve the course objectives effectively.

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