

Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Folktales: Implications for Teaching English Language and Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

This research explored cross-cultural comparisons of three folk tales, Cinderella (Europe), Malin Kundang (Indonesia), and Momotaro (Japan), with a focus on their application in English language teaching. The research aimed to analyze these tales' narrative structures, themes, and moral messages and examine their pedagogical value in fostering cultural awareness and enhancing language proficiency among students. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research applied Vladimir Propp's narrative structure theory to analyze the common patterns and functions across the folk tales. The findings revealed that, despite their cultural differences, the stories shared similar narrative frameworks, such as the hero's journey, confrontation with evil, and the restoration of justice. Furthermore, the thematic analysis highlighted universal moral messages, such as the consequences of wrongdoing, the importance of filial duty, and the values of teamwork and courage. This research demonstrated that folk tales were valuable tools for enhancing English language instruction, offering students linguistic skills and a deeper understanding of global cultural values. The implications for teaching suggested that folk tales could improve cross-cultural communication, promote critical thinking, and provide an engaging method for language learning, making them a practical pedagogical resource.

Keywords: Cross-cultural comparison, Folk tales, English language teaching, Vladimir Propp

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INTRODUCTION

Folklore is an important part of every society's cultural heritage. Folklore has been used since ancient times as a form of oral literature to convey cultural values, moral teachings, and life lessons to future generations. These stories serve as entertainment and educational tools that reflect a particular society's thoughts, beliefs, and norms. Every folk tale, despite originating from oral tradition, contains profound messages about virtue, justice, and the consequences of

wrongdoing (Avcu, 2025). Through stories such as *Cinderella*, *Malin Kundang*, and *Momotaro*, we can see how diverse societies convey the same moral messages through different structures and contexts.

With the growing interest in cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication, folk tales in English language teaching are gaining attention. Folk tales from various cultures offer opportunities to learn language and introduce students to diverse cultural values. For example, stories such as *Cinderella* (from Europe), *Malin Kundang* (from Indonesia), and *Momotaro* (from Japan) allow students to understand diverse cultural values while improving their English language skills. Research has shown that folk tales effectively improve language skills, text comprehension, and vocabulary while fostering cultural awareness among students (Aniuranti et al., 2025).

The understanding of the structure of folk tales has long been studied by many scholars, one of whom is Vladimir Propp. In his famous work, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Propp identified common patterns in Russian folk tales and showed that although these stories originated from different cultures, they often follow a similar narrative structure. Propp noted that folk tales often involve recurring roles, such as heroes, villains, and witches, which serve to develop a plot involving the hero's struggle and victory (Propp, 1968). This theory was later expanded by many scholars, who showed that similar patterns can be found in folk tales from various cultures and languages, including stories such as *Cinderella*, *Malin Kundang*, and *Momotaro*. This approach allows us to understand how similar story elements appear in different cultures despite vastly different contexts (Dogra, 2017).

In English language teaching, folk tales can be used for more than just reading and analyzing texts. Folk tales can also serve as tools for improving critical thinking skills and cross-cultural understanding. For example, in *Cinderella* and *Malin Kundang*, although the cultural backgrounds of the two stories are different, they both contain the same moral theme: the consequences of evil deeds. Meanwhile, stories such as *Momotaro* offer courage and cooperation in facing greater challenges, which are very relevant to the values of collectivism in Japanese culture (Wibowo, 2021). Through the analysis of these stories, students not only learn English but can also compare moral values that exist in different cultures.

In addition, research shows that comparing folk tales from different cultures can enrich students' understanding of cultural diversity and broaden their view of the world. Using folk tales as a teaching medium makes English teaching more interactive and engaging. Students are encouraged to not only learn the language but also understand the perspectives and traditions that exist in different societies. As stated by (Alharbi, 2024) the use of folk tales in English teaching encourages students to explore different cultural narratives, improve their literacy skills, and, at the same time, foster empathy and appreciation for cultural diversity.

This research aims to analyze the comparison of folk tales from various cultures, such as *Cinderella*, *Malin Kundang*, and *Momotaro*, and explore the role of these stories in English language teaching and cultural awareness among students. This research primarily focuses on analyzing the narrative structure, themes, and moral messages in the three folk tales. Additionally, this study investigates how applying these folk tales in English language teaching can enhance language proficiency, broaden cultural understanding, and develop critical thinking skills among students. Through this approach, folk tales can become a practical teaching resource to enrich the English language learning process by providing a deeper understanding of the cultural values present in various traditions. This research also evaluated the pedagogical implications of using folk tales as teaching materials in the context of English language classes, as well as how these stories can enrich students' learning experiences by introducing broader cultural perspectives.

METHOD

Type of Research

This research used a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the research aimed to understand and compare folk tales from various cultures, namely *Cinderella* (Europe), *Malin Kundang* (Indonesia), and *Momotaro* (Japan). The research also aimed to identify and analyze the structural elements, themes, and moral messages contained in these folk tales and how these stories could be applied in English language teaching.

Data Source

The data sources in this research were translated folk tales into English. The texts analyzed were:

- *Cinderella* (European),
- *Malin Kundang* (Indonesian), and
- *Momotaro* (Japanese).
- These stories were selected because each had strong cultural relevance and was widely known in its respective culture.

Data Collection Techniques

- **Literature Review:** The researcher collected folk tale texts from various reliable sources, such as books or related articles, in their original languages and translations.
- **Text Analysis:** Each story was analyzed to identify narrative structure, characters, themes, and moral messages.

Research Procedure

The steps in this research were:

- **Story Selection:** *Cinderella*, *Malin Kundang*, and *Momotaro* are the stories to be analyzed.
- **Text Collection:** Texts from folk tales translated into English were collected.
- **Story Analysis:** The stories were analyzed based on narrative structure (using Propp's theory), characters, themes, and moral messages.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparison:** The elements were compared to identify similarities and differences in moral themes and narrative structures between stories from different cultures.
- **Teaching Implications:** Based on the results of the analysis, this study suggested ways to use folk tales in English language teaching to improve students' language skills and cultural awareness.

Research Instruments

The main instrument in this research was a text analysis sheet that included:

- Narrative structure based on Propp's theory,
- The main themes and moral messages of each story,
- Cross-cultural comparison of characters and story elements.

Data Analysis Techniques

- **Thematic Analysis:** The main themes in each story, such as justice, courage, and morality, were identified.
- **Narrative Analysis:** Vladimir Propp's theory was used to analyze the story's structure, including the main functions in folk tales.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparison:** Comparisons between the stories were compiled to identify similarities and differences in themes, characters, and morality transmitted by each story.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research aims to explore how cross-cultural comparisons of folktales, specifically Cinderella (from Europe), Malin Kundang (from Indonesia), and Momotaro (from Japan), can enhance English language teaching and cultural awareness. By analyzing the narrative structure, themes, and moral messages inherent in these folk tales, this research seeks to demonstrate the pedagogical value of using folk tales in the classroom, particularly for developing language proficiency and cultural sensitivity among students.

Comparison of Structure and Narrative

Table 1. Propp's functions

Propp's Functions	Cinderella	Malin Kundang	Momotaro
Initial Situation	Cinderella is mistreated by her family.	Malin Kundang abandons his mother.	Momotaro is born and prepared for an adventure.
Departure	Cinderella is sent to the ball.	Malin Kundang leaves to seek his fortune.	Momotaro leaves to fight the ogres.
Adventurous Quest	Cinderella receives help from the fairy godmother.	Malin Kundang travels and prospers.	Momotaro gathers companions to fight ogres.
Return	Cinderella marries the prince.	Malin Kundang returns, but is cursed by his mother.	Momotaro defeats ogres and returns home.
Resolution	Cinderella achieves happiness.	Malin Kundang faces punishment.	Momotaro is celebrated for his bravery.

Using Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), a structural analysis of the three folk tales reveals striking similarities and differences in narrative functions. Propp's theory identifies 31 functions, such as departure, search, and the hero's return, which recur in many folk tales. Applying these functions to Cinderella, Malin Kundang, and Momotaro shows that these folk tales share the same structural elements despite cultural differences.

Cinderella: The narrative structure closely follows Propp's model. Cinderella (the main character) experiences initial misfortune (abuse by her stepfamily), a quest (help from her fairy godmother), and finally returns to her social status (marriage to the prince). This story aligns with Propp's functions of "departure" and "return" but emphasizes themes of kindness, humility, and reward.

Malin Kundang: Similar to Cinderella, Malin Kundang follows a journey structure. However, this story highlights the importance of filial piety and the consequences of disobedience. Malin's return from his successful journey triggers his mother's curse, emphasizing the moral lesson of respecting one's parents—a core value in Indonesian culture. This story aligns with Propp's functions of "error," "punishment," and "return," but with a cultural twist that reflects moral and familial values.

Momotaro: The story of Momotaro combines Propp's "hero's departure" and "confrontation with the villain," where the hero, aided by animal friends, defeats a giant. While maintaining the hero's journey's structural pattern, this story emphasizes teamwork, courage, and collective action, values highly cherished in Japanese society. The moral of this folk tale centers on virtues such as courage and cooperation.

Thus, these folk tales fit within Propp's structural framework but also reflect the unique cultural values of their respective societies. The same structural elements throughout these stories underscore the universal nature of folk tales while highlighting how cultural context shapes the presentation of moral values.

Thematic and Moral Comparisons

Table 2. Themes

Themes	Cinderella	Malin Kundang	Momotaro
Moral Message	Virtue is rewarded, and evil is punished.	Importance of respecting parents.	Teamwork, bravery, and overcoming challenges.
Cultural Values	Emphasizes kindness and humility.	Highlights family loyalty and respect.	Emphasizes collaboration and courage.
Cultural Context	Western emphasis on individual triumph.	Indonesian values of familial piety.	Japanese values of teamwork and courage.

A thematic comparison between Cinderella, Malin Kundang, and Momotaro reveals several universal moral lessons, regardless of their different cultural backgrounds. Cinderella and Malin Kundang both emphasize justice and the consequences of moral actions. In Cinderella, kindness is rewarded, and cruelty is punished, resonating with universal ideas about good versus evil. Similarly, Malin Kundang teaches the importance of respecting family and focusing on filial duty, a core value in many Asian cultures. Both stories combine the idea that good behavior leads to positive outcomes, while immoral actions result in punishment.

In contrast, Momotaro focuses more on collective effort and courage, highlighting the importance of cooperation and bravery in overcoming challenges. This reflects Japanese cultural values, where community and teamwork are often prioritized over individual achievements. The common moral themes throughout these folktales, justice, virtue, and punishment, are crucial for fostering cultural awareness in English language classrooms. Students are not only exposed to different cultures but also introduced to shared human values, which helps them develop empathy and a broader worldview.

DISCUSSION

Pedagogical Implications

This research has several implications for English teaching. First, folk tales can be a powerful tool for teaching narrative structure, vocabulary mastery, and cultural literacy (Claria, 2023). By comparing stories from different cultures, students can learn how different societies use the same narrative framework to convey universal moral lessons (Yakumbu et al., 2025). In addition, analyzing the values embedded in these stories can enhance students' understanding of cultural nuances and encourage critical thinking (Lwin, 2016).

For example, a comparison between Cinderella and Malin Kundang can be used to explore how different cultures approach themes of justice and family duty. Teachers can encourage students to discuss the similarities and differences in the moral lessons conveyed in these stories, thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding and deeper engagement with the texts.

Additionally, incorporating Momotaro into the curriculum can encourage students to reflect on the importance of teamwork, collaboration, and courage virtues highly relevant in group activities and collaborative learning environments. Integrating these themes into language instruction enhances language and interpersonal skills, which are crucial in today's interconnected world (Humayra et al., 2025).

Practical Application in the Classroom

To use this folk tale effectively in English class, teachers can employ various strategies: **Narrative Analysis:** Students can analyze the structure of each story, identifying Proppian functions such as departure, quest, and return. This activity will help students understand narrative organization and its application in cross-cultural storytelling (Putri, 2020; Arwin et al., 2022).

Thematic Discussion: Teachers can guide discussions about each story's theme, comparing how values such as justice, respect, and teamwork are presented in different cultural contexts. This builds language skills and encourages cultural awareness and critical thinking (Rita et al., 2021; Hastini et al., 2023).

Role-playing and dramatization: Students can act out scenes from folk tales to better understand the characters' motivations and the cultural significance of their actions. This kinesthetic learning approach enhances understanding and allows students to embody the cultural values reflected in the stories (Sarte et al., 2021; Hediyanah et al., 2024).

Building vocabulary: Folk tales are rich in descriptive language and cultural references. Teachers can use them to teach new vocabulary related to cultural practices, emotions, and moral concepts, enhancing students' vocabulary and understanding of cultural nuances (Handrianto et al., 2021; Gustianing, 2022).

Comparing Cinderella, Malin Kundang, and Momotaro provides a rich resource for language learners, offering linguistic development and insights into the values that shape different societies. By analyzing the structure and themes of these stories, students can improve their language skills while deepening their understanding of cross-cultural narratives. This pedagogical approach aligns with contemporary language teaching methods, which emphasize integrating cultural knowledge into language learning (Anggraini et al., 2022; Dalilah & Ashila, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that comparing cross-cultural folk tales is valuable for enhancing English language learning and cultural awareness. By analyzing the narrative structure, themes, and moral messages of Cinderella, Malin Kundang, and Momotaro, this research shows that folk tales provide an excellent medium for developing language skills and fostering empathy and cross-cultural understanding. These folk tales can be incorporated into language teaching engagingly and educationally through structured analysis, discussion, and dramatization. This approach enhances students' language skills and helps them appreciate the diversity of human experiences and values.

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