Project-based language learning through folk and fairy tales

The story of a tale project before and during the pandemic

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Project-based learning is one of the most effective ways to help students acquire the _four_ key competencies of twenty-first-century education: creativity, critical thinking, effective communication, and collaboration. Launched by Apor Vilmos Catholic College in 2015 in cooperation with the University of Winchester, _The Tale Project_ is based on a 'four Cs' foundation. The project method inspires our students' creativity and develops their critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills while encouraging them to learn and work effectively as part of a group. Developing foreign language competencies, pedagogical, and art competencies also belongs to the emphasised objectives for cooperation between the two institutions. The project covers the content area of _Intercultural Dialogue through Folktale Traditions_, and in each academic year, English and Hungarian students work on different stories and tale-cycles. The 2019/20 academic year was a turning point in the history of the project. Since the Covid-19 lockdown in March, 2020, we have been obliged to explore and apply the new innovative methods offered by online education, virtual exchange, and alternative ways of communication.

Keywords: intercultural dialogue, folktale traditions, project-based learning, storytelling, early foreign language development

Beginnings

Over the past few decades, talent support and research has become one of the most crucial educational issues in Hungary. Teachers have a great responsibility and many tasks in promoting talent and developing the potential possessed by their students. As is known, discovering resources in young people is not enough: talent fostering must be intertwined with improving different skills and competences such as communication and presentation skills, social and emotional competences, self-monitoring skills, and many others. Developing intercultural competence, one of the so-called key competences, is also essential.

While there are skills and competences there are also several ways to develop these in order to promote talent successfully. One such way is to

bring together the students of two teacher training institutes from different countries. Students can work together to collaborate in research, learn about one another's cultures, share their knowledge, and, finally, meet in person when visiting each other's institutions. This is exactly what two teacher training institutes, The University of Winchester and Apor Vilmos Catholic University, a member of the National Talent Support Network, decided to do by launching a joint project.

The idea was born at an international conference held in 2015. Jonathan Rooke and Agnes Streitmann, two lecturers from different institutions but with a shared enthusiasm for children's literature, realised that despite studying in two different European countries, some of the tales the students analysed were the same. Some commonality could clearly be found in the approaches and analytical tools. The question arose of whether students from Hungary and England study folk and fairy tales together: could a selection of folk and fairy tales be made that would enable each class of students to study and compare at their respective institutions? What would students discover about how the same folk and fairy tales were understood while cultural differences enriched a variety of ways of representing the stories? How would English and Hungarian students teach the same tales to young children in school? As an initial step, appropriate tales were selected and a project plan was outlined. An art teacher, Andrea Székely from AVCC, was also invited to participate, and an international research project was born covering the content area of 'Intercultural Dialogue through Folktale Traditions'.

Intercultural dialogue through tales of different cultures

Folktales represent a literary genre that abounds with all kinds of values and addresses commonly shared psychological, moral, and cultural issues in a delightful imaginative way. Tales offer solutions and suggestions regarding how to 'grow safely into maturity…they confront the child squarely with basic human predicaments' (Bettelheim, 1989, p. 8), and assert that, by struggling courageously, obstacles can be overcome. Furthermore, folktales both address, express, and satisfy the basic needs of the human psyche. Not only do they serve as an outlet for expressing the child's formless anxieties or violent fantasies, they also make children aware that people all around the world share the same universal feelings such as love and hate, envy and pride, sorrow and joy.

In folktales, important existential issues and conflicts are conveyed in a brief and pointed way that enables children to grasp the meaning of these questions in their most essential form. Several scholars argue that the universal, regular, recurrent themes found in folktales originate from the fact that they are rooted in rituals of tribal cultures that addressed significant moments of transition in human life. These moments of transition concern such crucial issues as birth, becoming a young adult, courtship, love, marriage, giving birth, aging and death, and are depicted in a symbolic form. The famous folklorist, Arnold van Gennep, depicts these moments of transition as rites of passage and argues that these transitions of human life have the same structure all around the

world: separation – transition – incorporation. (Van Gennep, 1999). These moments of transition are usually accompanied by serious existential anxieties; folktales, which can be considered 'encoded representations' of these tribal rituals, also offer solutions and suggestions for how to deal with the problems accompanying these moments of transitions (Van Gennep, 1999, p. 102).

If we consider only the psychological and anthropological aspects of folktales mentioned above, we can say that they represent universal issues that do not relate to time and place. Folktales express universal feelings and address basic human themes. Although this is true, the opposite can also be stated. As Andrew Teverson asserts, 'fairy tales like myths and legends, take different forms at different times, and the forms they take reflect the places in which they have settled, and the particular historical moments in which they have been recorded, interpreted and preserved. Fairy tale is not universal or timeless; neither is it innocent of history and politics. On the contrary, it speaks powerfully of the times in which it has been told' (Teverson, 2013, p. 7).

In addition, a folktale speaks powerfully of the places in which it has been told. For example, due to the commercial activities of medieval merchants in the Mediterranean region, tales from the East blended into the European tradition, resulting in affinities between Oriental and European tales. Yet significant differences also exist between these two traditions. Despite 'crosscultural contamination' (Zipes, 2001, p. 845), we can definitely distinguish the typical motifs, meanings, plots, characters, and settings of European folk tales from those of Oriental ones. As Ildikó Boldizsár, a well-known Hungarian folklore scholar and editor of best-selling fairy-tale anthologies, asserts that Arabian, Persian, Kashmir, Egyptian, Japanese, Chinese and Hindu tales are more pointedly educational compared to their European counterparts. Their moral message is more exact and offers wise pieces of advice (Boldizsár, 2015). It can therefore be concluded that folktales are universal and timeless, but also historically bound. Tales share the same universal, traditional values and are simultaneously specific, historically, and culturally bound. They convey common truths and values and also represent different kinds of cultural heritage, customs, and traditions. These factors mean that folk and fairy tales of different nations and cultures can be effective ways of promoting intercultural dialogue.

Educational institutions have a great responsibility in familiarising students with their own tradition and culture. It is essential that they make young people 'aware of their own roots and provide points of reference which allow them to define their own personal place in the world' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013, p. 22). The first reason for this is because they should respect 'the human person who seeks the truth of his or her own being'; secondly, self-awareness, or an awareness of one's own tradition and culture, can promote the process of recognising the equivalent dignity of a person from a different culture and faith (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013, p. 22). Pedagogical institutions are called upon to encourage their students to learn about and respect other people's culture and faith and, on the basis of this knowledge, start a dialogue with individuals from different cultural heritage backgrounds. These values inspired the University of Winchester and Apor

Vilmos Catholic University to launch the tale project to compare and share different folk tale traditions and explore associated pedagogy.

Project objectives

One of the main goals of the project is to offer participating students the opportunity to gain international experience by meeting and pursuing project activities together with students from the partner institution. The project also emphasises the intercultural aspects of folk tale tradition by means of students investigating similarities and differences. Beyond research and knowledge exchange, students are further encouraged to explore folk tale traditions as rich contents for expressing their thoughts, ideas, and feelings concerning human relationships, social changes, and the connection between the past and present. By collaborating with primary schools from each country, the project makes it possible for students to compare diverse pedagogical practices. By inviting different cultural institutions and organizations to participate – for example Kabóca Puppet Theatre in Veszprém, the Budapest Story Museum and the Animation Film Studio of Kecskemét on AVCC's part – the project offers a truly versatile project experience.

For Hungarian students, the project also offers the possibility to develop their English language skills through offering the benefits of integrating language development with content learning. Studying folk tale traditions in English provides the students with a meaningful context and a cognitively engaging and demanding content that inspires students to enhance their level of English proficiency. Students can become aware of the versatility of using the English language as a tool during the creative process facilitated by the project.

Beyond developing English language competence and promoting linguistic confidence, students are encouraged to develop their pedagogical skills by doing pedagogical work. They acquire the innovative pedagogical approaches related to early childhood education which they can use in a school context and gain experience in applying different storytelling techniques, puppetry, and drama activities in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners. During the project, we make our students aware of the fact that the main aim of early foreign language teaching is to make children enjoy being in the foreign language context: to make them motivated, get them involved, and keep them engaged. Students learn that children at an early age basically explore the world through their senses and the actions and interaction they encounter in meaningful situations. It therefore follows that classroom activities should be play-based, action-centred, and accompanied by a lot of non-verbal communication and repetition.

Project work long before the pandemic

The in-college work at AVCC is based on two talent-fostering optional courses: the Storytelling Course taught by Agnes Streitmann in English, and the Art

Course offered by Andrea Székely (2019) in Hungarian. The storytelling course comprises both textual analysis and the exploration of pedagogical applications aimed at primary school children. It familiarises students with different kinds of storytelling techniques, analysis tools, graphic organisers that support children in understanding the structure of a story and how to organise information and ideas efficiently. During the course, students become acquainted with analytical grids for making comparisons and grouping the motifs, functions, and meanings of tales. They also perform stories using *kamishibai*, prepare story maps, story mountains, story strings, and story dices. They learn how to apply objects like story pebbles or story discs to their pedagogical work with children, how to put together a story sack for a storytelling project activity. Artistic aspects are also emphasised in both institutions. The advantages of integrating storytelling with music by performing stories using musical instruments are also discussed; project activities led by students in English and Hungarian primary schools always include puppetry, drama, and art and craft activities (Streitmann & Székely, 2019; Streitman, et al, 2021).

Students are also encouraged to investigate the ways tales are represented in diverse cultural forms by means of picture books, media adaptations, images, and illustrations. For sharing both research findings, and pedagogical experiences, a project website has been created that contains project activity plans, powerpoint presentations, videos, research papers, film links, and records of pedagogical practice from students of both universities. For online informal communication, students created a closed Facebook page.

In parallel with the English and Hungarian students' cooperation, there is also primary school work. In the autumn term students prepare project activity plans covering the topics agreed upon at the beginning of the academic year, and lead project activities in their home countries. Primary partner schools host the students and assist them in their practical classroom work with children. During these project activities in their home countries, students experiment with ideas for teaching children about folk and fairy tales.

Having refined these ideas, they prepare to share the finalised classroom pedagogical techniques with their partner students during the project weeks held in Winchester and Vác during the spring term. The most significant event of the project in the spring term is this international exchange: Hungarian students travel to Winchester in March while the English students arrive at AVCC in April. During these project weeks, students participate in inspiring and enjoyable thematic programmes and lead project activities at primary schools in Vác and Winchester.

From its inception, the project has aimed at experimenting with new media for communication and research sharing and fusing these new technologies with traditional European storytelling approaches to explore exciting pedagogical opportunities for student teachers and their pupils in the classroom. The use of tablet technology, e.g., Apple iPads, has become a significant part of both the English and the Hungarian students' learning experience. They explore the possibilities of using the app I Can Animate to enable children to script and make digital puppet shows based on the fairy and folk tales.

Pedagogical approaches that are reliant upon different ways of adapting Hungarian folk tales have become relevant and valuable sites for knowledge exchange. The different folk tales of the imaginative cartoon series entitled *Hungarian Folk Tales*, an adaptation that represents the rich tradition of Hungarian animation, have also been welcomed by the English students. Hungarian filmstrips comprise another interesting way to adapt folk tales in Hungary. Once popular in the 1960s and 70s, the beginning of the new millennium has seen a revival in Hungarian filmstrips that are once more available in bookshops; several can also be found in English. Given that it does not exist in England, Hungary's vibrant tradition in puppetry is also of great interest to Winchester students.

Changing times: traditional and digital storytelling techniques in early foreign language teaching[1]

Tales belonging to the same folk tale cycle have always been favoured in the project. Students have done research and pedagogical work on tales of animal bridegroom fairy-tale cycle, on different *Jack and the Beanstalk* variants, on *The Gingerbread Man* and other tales belonging to the *Fleeing Pancake* type of tale. One of the most popular and successful topics with both the students and the school children has been the *Cinderella cycle,* which we worked on in the 2017/18 academic year. As a fairy tale, *Cinderella* offers various possibilities of repetition through recurring thematic and language elements, and we were lucky enough to find an absolutely appropriate script for our purposes in Sarah Phillips' wonderful book entitled, *Drama with Children.* (Phillips, 2010). The script is suitable for children still at an elementary level and whose active use of English is very limited. The dialogues contain several simple phrases and sentences from everyday life that are repeated frequently.

In the autumn semester, students dramatised the tale in the form of a hand puppet performance relying basically on Sarah Phillips' script (2010), which was slightly simplified, shortened, and adapted to the style of the play. In the second one they applied the technique of stop motion digital storytelling and adapted the text to the needs of the animated version.

The basic questions concerning the puppet performance were the following: what kind of puppets should be used in what kind of setting; what kind of drama techniques are best to apply? Although this was a puppet performance, the meaning of the word 'puppet' was extended: although students played the roles with real puppets, they also used different objects and materials that they thought suitable for the play. Finding the right objects and materials to be used as props and scenery, discussing together the appropriate techniques, making decisions: all these activities were part of a creating process that was intended to provide a practical basis for their later pedagogical work. The conventional idea of a hand puppet performance concerning techniques, setting, and

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[1] The edited version of the article was written together with Andrea Székely and published in the Journal of the Comenius Association, 2019. No. 28.

scenery was subverted given that students used their hands the opposite way, their fingers were the arms and legs of the characters. There was no curtain, the tale was performed on a table, a tablecloth represented the floor, and by replacing, changing the various dotted, patterned tablecloths, students were able to manage the changes of the locations in an easy, playful way. The dots indicated the seeds (millet, lentil…), and different patterns represented different locations. These technical solutions all aimed at embedding the performance into the magical atmosphere that forms an integral part of fairy tales.

In the second semester, we applied a different storytelling technique: stop motion animation. Choosing a different method to dramatise the tale offered students a new encounter with the literary material and the opportunity to rethink the topic, script, images, and suitable expressive tools. Applying various dramatic approaches to the same material also highlighted the advantages of using different kinds of pedagogical methods in their future work as teachers. Furthermore, preparing animated films is in line with young people's way of thinking, interest and creativity; we could also rely on their expertise in this field.

Concerning the theme, we emphasised the same two motifs centred around in the puppet performance: the motifs of *dancing* and the *quest for the owner* of *the shoe.* This time, students were supposed to use different materials, a new logic of the images, and needed to work within a significantly shortened and altered text.

Several other challenges had to be faced face: first of all, the appropriate types of materials had to be selected. We watched several animation films, collected ideas, and discussed them. This analysis was followed by experimenting with different kinds of materials, for example, sand, paper, or plasticine. Finally, we decided to use natural materials we could find in the college garden, such as leaves, flowers, branches, or seedpods. The next step was to choose what kind of flowers, leaves, or seedpods could symbolise the different characters in the most expressive way, such as the material to use for representing the shoe, an iconic object in the tale. In order to do this, we held a 'casting session' for selecting the right type of plant for a particular role, analysed the plants, and tried to explore their special features. Then followed an art and craft activity: we had to create the characters from the chosen plants. Every phase of the working process had to be planned in detail and the task had to be accomplished quickly because the plants grew dry or withered and only one portion of the plants could be used at once.

Concerning the text, the logic of filmmaking was only partially followed. As one of the main areas of the whole tale project is investigating different ways of conveying tale texts to young learners of English, we focused on the text. We relied heavily on the basic dramatic text used in the hand-puppet performance, but changed the dramatic concept and the scenes. At the very beginning it became obvious that the original script was too long and needed to be shortened. The question arose of which scenes, locations, characters, etc. should be removed. Would there be pictures that could carry the entire meaning of a scene without any text at all? How is it possible to express the relation between the characters in a visual language? Last but not least, how

can we convey magic or enchanted transformations in a spectacular way? The working process was a continuous rethinking of synchronising images and text. While filming, the text changed a minimum of three times.

Applying two different techniques to tell the story of *Cinderella* had several benefits for the students in view of their study skills. Comparing the two kinds of representational modes, identifying similarities and differences, selecting, grouping, studying motifs, functions and meanings, analysing the working processes were aspects that they became engaged in. Acquiring these learning processes provided them with the experience and knowledge they would then have as a basis for their future careers in education.

Observing, contemplating nature, and integrating nature and technology were also beneficial for students in view of their future pedagogical work. While preparing the stop-motion *Cinderella* version, students became aware of the advantages of using natural objects in digital storytelling. They experienced how it is possible to connect children to nature applying digital technology.

The images of the animated film were inspired by the forms of nature and created from natural objects. Students were looking at plants, identified different species, and some of these objects became characters in the film. While observing nature in search of appropriate 'plant-characters', students were actively learning about nature. Searching for, investigating, experimenting, and identifying: all of these activities naturally open the door to the development of creative thinking while enriching the imagination. If we use natural objects in digital storytelling, film locations can be a garden, a park, the school yard, or a place connected to an excursion. Thus, storytelling, technology, and environmental education can become integrated.

Several aspects of time are worth paying attention to as well. Plants have their own life span: as time passes, they acquire different shapes and forms that we must take into consideration. Yet changes and transformations can also offer new opportunities for integration into the dramatic concept as significant motifs. Furthermore, making an animated film – even a short one – takes a long time and therefore requires patience, care, accuracy, and dedication. These are useful skills and knowledge for both university students and school children. Last but not least, there is the opportunity to disseminate the film among friends, family members.

Project work during the pandemic: developing the 4 Cs through tales, drama, and picture books[2]

Although the project covers the content area of *Intercultural Dialogue through Folktale Traditions* and basically focuses on this theme, every academic year English and Hungarian students work on a new topic based on the four key competencies of twenty-first-century education: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. Students conduct investigations, share

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[2] The edited version of the article written together with Jonathan Rooke and Andrea Székely and published in the *Journal of the Comenius Association*, 2021. No. 29.

research findings and pedagogical experiences, discuss, and reflect on each other's ideas to achieve a shared goal through collaboration and carry out project activities together to create products connecting to the topic. Project work is designed and built according to Bender's principles of project-based learning (Bender, 2012). In the 2019/20 academic year the project, faced the difficulties posed by the pandemic quarantine restrictions, but successfully overcame these challenges. In September, the initiation phase was marked by establishing the foundation for the project topic, which was dedicated to Developing the 4 Cs via folk and fairy tales by using objects and images. Students were encouraged to identify the topic to be investigated within this framework while bearing in mind that the main questions are: what, why, and for whom?

In the autumn term, the pedagogical work of the Hungarian students centred around the Hungarian folktale entitled *The Mayor's Clever Daughter*. Students presented it first to Hungarian primary-school pupils (possessing a pre-intermediate level of English) and then to English primary-school pupils (native speakers) during the project week in Winchester.

In the beginning of the enquiry phase, students were encouraged to participate in discussions promoting in-depth understanding of the complexity surrounding the issue of 'being a clever girl/woman' today and how this quality was represented in the past. During the discussions, students were asked to express their views and to communicate them persuasively while respecting the opinions of others.

Students investigated the text to search for passages that can inspire children's creativity, critical thinking, and elements in the tale that many be irrelevant, incomprehensible, or inconceivable for children. Students shared their personal impressions, drew on their pedagogical experience concerning this issue, and came to the agreement that the text contains some erotic scenes that are not suitable for young children. In addition, some of the riddles in the tale are out of date and would not engage children while the narrative part was judged as being too overwhelming. A few dialogues, however, were viewed as possessing the ability to render the performance dynamic.

Having outlined the problems concerning the text and preparing a script based on dialogues, students set out to do research on the formal possibilities of adaptation in the context of puppetry, animation, and theatrical performances. After receiving the guidelines, students worked cooperatively and defined the research processes themselves. They investigated the possibilities offered by object animation (Ellinger, 2017), a technique that explores the dramatic power of everyday objects. They additionally familiarised themselves with the rules of table-top puppetry and how to apply them creatively. On the basis of an analysis of their symbolic meaning, students followed the processes of collecting and selecting objects. Finally, students decided to place the story in a new context using kitchen utensils and everyday objects and substituted child-friendly riddles.

During the project week in Winchester, Hungarian and English students collaboratively prepared to carry out the project activity with English primary-

school children. The English students learned new methods of engaging children with a fairy tale by communicating the story in different ways and developing their responses using creative activities.

The Covid-19 lockdown in March prevented English students from meeting the Hungarian students in Vác as the project-week at AVCC was cancelled. We had to use online platforms and new learning strategies, throughout which personal experience became even more important. The situation inspired us to find a new topic and demanded even more creative alternative patterns of thinking, problem-solving, and methods of communicating so we could collaborate effectively during these challenging circumstances.

Finally, we decided to investigate *Otthon*, a silent book by a Hungarian artist, Kinga Rofusz (2018). There were several reasons for choosing this book during the lockdown. Firstly, as a silent book without any text at all, it supported critical thinking and creativity by inspiring students to create their own stories entirely via illustrations. We thus expected to collect as many stories as there are project participants. Secondly, the title and its theme home was thought to evoke new associations and symbolic meanings concerning the concept of 'home' during the quarantine period while inspiring new ways of interpreting the feelings and emotions related to the condition of staying at home. The theme provoked questions such as, 'What does home mean during this period? How does this connect to the book and how does it inspire thoughts on this concept of home?' (Rofusz, 2018)

Rich themes to discuss critically included change, home, and moving. The range of emotions invited questions about what reaction texts awaken in readers, the authors' point of view, and how the text positions the reader (Roche, 2015). Discussions about what the pictures mean, how and why the author constructed them, evolved into rich analyses focusing on perspective, tone, positioning, size, and colour (Moebius, 1986).

As the project went online, we had to determine which platform would be the right fit for our needs. In the end, we used several: students joined a class on Google classroom and also collaborated with each other using Zoom and Skype for their online meetings. While sharing information, using newly acquired knowledge, and making decisions, students finally created their own online products. They produced filmstrips based on their own stories and stop-motion video scenes reflecting their emotions evoked by the theme. When performing the stories, they utilised different kinds of storytelling and drama techniques in their rooms or home garden, thereby incorporating nature in the product. They collaboratively authored and created digital storystrings while using a variety of online platforms to write, design, film and edit story sections. In conclusion it can be said that students were able to create an innovative shared outcome that drew from the original book itself using the 4Cs.

The scene is now set for a new form of intercultural project incorporating the participants' experiences concerning online education, virtual exchange, and new ways of communication. We had already aimed to develop our digital competence to be able to fuse new digital technologies with traditional storytelling approaches and explore new pedagogical opportunities for

our students both during their in-college work and during their primary school work. What has proven successful in the cooperation between the two institutions so far should be preserved as sustainable work is a priority. However, becoming familiar with new innovative models for collaboration and effectively adapting them into our own context is also inevitable.

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