



# Kono folktale and its relevance in teaching language arts (English) in primary school

Sahr Jimissa

Language Education Department, Milton Margai College of Education and Technology, Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa  
sajimissa@gmail.com

Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)

Received 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2018, revised 24<sup>th</sup> December 2019, accepted 9<sup>th</sup> March 2020

## Abstract

*This research work attempts to experiment the use of Oral Literature (folktale) to teach Language Arts (English). The focus is to investigate the relevance of Kono folktale in teaching Language Arts (English) in primary schools in Sierra Leone. To accomplish the objectives set for this work, a tale was selected, recorded in Kono and later translated into English. On analyzing the data I discovered that folktales are relevant resource materials for teaching Language Arts in primary schools. The aspect of oral language skills, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development and the concept of comprehension and critical thinking can be enhanced through this approach. Through this, a holistic approach can be used to teach Language Arts, rather than the usual fragmented approach of teaching the various strands of Language Arts. The success of this approach hinges on the readily accessibility of the teaching and learning materials, which are culturally friendly to the learner, as the tale belongs to the community.*

**Keywords:** Kono, folktale, relevance, teaching.

## Introduction

Folktales are traditional arts, literature, knowledge and practices that are passed on in large part through oral communication. They are imaginative narrative, which are in prose form but may have their bases in real life experiences. Generally, they are imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended to entertain, educate and teach moral lessons. Thompson Defined folk literature as: 'A traditional knowledge and belief of culture having no written language<sup>1</sup>. It is transmitted by word of the mouth and consists of prose and verse, narrative, poems and songs, myth, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles and the like'. Kono as an ethnic group in Sierra Leone is rich in folk literature. They occupy a district called Kono, which is densely populated because of the diamond mining activities. This research work is to investigate, whether folktale in Kono can be used to enhance Language Arts teaching in primary school. There is a general assertion that the tale being the property of the community or society, can provide an opportunity for the child to learn with the help of what he had experienced at home during storytelling.

**Why folktale is selected:** Kono as an ethnic group is rich in folklores and for that some institutions have been established to uphold these oral art forms. The most prominent among these are the family institution and the secret societies – "Poro" for men and "Bondo" for women<sup>2</sup>. These institutions served as training grounds for young boys and girls and acts as a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. They use folktales as a channel through which the belief systems, knowledge, norms, moral values of the society are acquired.

The information in these tales is communicated verbally and they are made up of shared ideas and values, which are passed from one generation to the other. It may be communicated in speech or song or through chants. Since the information is communicated orally, it may change in retelling and may appear in a variety of versions. Toeken, in his work "The dynamics of folklores" observes that "All folklores participate in a distinctive, dynamic process of constant change, variation within a tradition, whether intentional or advertently, is viewed here simply as a central fact of existence for folklores.....a defining feature that grows out of context, performance, attitudes, cultural taste and the likes"<sup>1</sup>. We can therefore say that the folklores which survived are those that are proved useful and suitable, even in contemporary situations.

A folktale forms part of an oral tradition, and does not have a single, identifiable author. They are passed on from one generation to the next and over time become expounded and reshaped with each retelling. They often reflect the values and customs of the culture from which they come. They are used to teach character traits, show concern for others, teach respect for elders etc. They also have both the moral and psychological aspects and as well as entertainment values depending upon the nature of the teller, the style of telling, the ages of the audience and the overall context of the performance. A skill storyteller can adapt his narrative to suit his specific audience<sup>3</sup>.

Seely Flint, in her book "Literate Lives" observed that the literacy experience at home will help the child to learn. From her observation, it is obvious that, there is a definite connection between the child's experiences at home to that he/she learns in

school<sup>4</sup>. This research work moves in that direction, investigating the relevance of Kono folktales in teaching language Arts (English) in primary school. The experiences the learners acquire at home form the basis or provide the required atmosphere for learning the target language (English). Teachers should therefore be aware of the fact that, every child coming to school for the first time knows something. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to draw upon, what the child has already acquired or experienced.

**Statement of problem:** Although oral art forms differ in many ways to the literary works addressed to the reading public, it enjoys the privilege of being part of the experience of both the literate and preliterate. Those who originally started this art form are responsible for the tradition that has been transformed into folk literature. They may have gone, only the tale remains to be repeated and often changed by subsequent storytellers, singers or bards. It survives in the course of history and is listened to by generations of both the lettered and the unlettered. The success of oral literature and its survival depends on how well it satisfies the emotional needs and intellectual interest of the people. The learners, before starting school, have at their disposal these knowledge and experience. Cooper and Kiger are very much in support of this view, when they observed that the development of reading and writing is a complex process that is built on speaking and listening skills<sup>1</sup>. As children observe, listen, speak and interact with adult and other children during storytelling, they learn the language and their home environments. This happens naturally and predictably for almost all the children.

Oral language provides the foundation for phonological awareness for learning the target language (English). As observed by Snow, Durns and Griffin, the development of the oral language also builds the vocabulary that is needed for reading comprehension and fluency<sup>5</sup>. Also, the Chief Examiner's report on the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE 2010) English result affirms that the high rate of failure in this subject is as a result of the fact that, pupils who attempted the exam could not read and comprehend the passage on summary and comprehension. The answers they gave do not reflect the requirements of the questions<sup>6</sup>.

The new educational policy for the indigenous languages was developed to eradicate the high rate of illiteracy in Sierra Leone. It states that: "The high rate of illiteracy is a setback to national development in Sierra Leone. Therefore strategies must be developed to eradicate illiteracy. One of the quickest and best ways of doing so is to give the citizens the opportunity to be literate in their mother tongue L1, and/or one of the community languages in the country"<sup>6</sup>. (chapter3:3:33)

In this regard, the folktale collected for this work was first transcribed in kono and translated into English.

**The definition of oral literature and its importance:** Oral literature is often viewed as traditional knowledge and beliefs of a community, which are not documented in any written language. It is transmitted by word of mouth through performance. Though it exist in an unwritten form, but it embraces all the forms off the genres of literature like prose or narrative, verse, poems and songs, miter, dramas, rituals, folktales, proverbs, riddles and the like<sup>7</sup>. Bukenya in an article: "Understanding Oral Literature", defines Oral Literature as: "A live dynamic participatory experience", from his perspective, the aspect of live participatory experience is of utmost importance as far as oral Literature is concerned<sup>1</sup>. It creates an avenue by means of which, the participation of the audience is enhanced; otherwise it could not be categorized as an oral art form. The narrator fit in bits and pieces of talent, which contribute to the quality of the narrative. He therefore succeeds in transmitting useful information about the culture and tradition of the community that owns it. Myfocus in this research work is on folktale in Kono, a component of oral Literature and its relevance in teaching language Arts (English) in the primary school.

Since Oral Literature is not written, it is regarded as a lively dynamic and participatory experience; which provides a kind of forum through which the aspect of entertainment is enhanced. Oral Literature and the good craftsmanship of the narrator, bring aesthetic pleasure to the audience in actual situations. For instance folktale narrated by an experienced narrator, does not only educate kids, but also creates a huge source of entertainment. An effective oral art form brings out the good inner life of a narrator. It can move the audience to cry, laugh and dream as the case might be. This provides an effective means learning<sup>3</sup>.

**Review of approaches adapted to teach English through Oral Literature:** Winsor P.J. adapted the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to teach literacy in Belize to children learning English as a second language (L2.) A greater percentage of the learners come from illiterate communities, whose mother tongue (L1) is not English. Her challenge therefore was to help those children in their first year of schooling as mandated by the curriculum to learn to speak, read and write English. In her approach Winsor stresses the importance of oral language as a foundation for literacy. She uses stories, essays and poeries that the young children and their teachers complete on chats, and they energetically re-read them together. In this context, the learners are engaged together with their teachers to compose, read and become confident in English Language learning. The materials developed during this exercise could be used during the ensuing days and the children love to revisit them throughout the weeks and months that comprised the school year<sup>5</sup>.

Taken into consideration the Sierra Leonean context, which bears a lot of similarities to that of the Belize education system, the LEA could be a suitable approach for the teaching of

Language Arts. The children having got a feel or experienced a tale at home and encountering it in the school once more will make learning rich, interactive and culturally relevant. It will engage both the teacher and children in a collaborative and independent learning process, where the children's experience both in and outside the classroom are translated into learning behaviors.

Kuyvenhoven J. took an overview of the Language Arts syllabus in Sierra Leone. She observed that the classroom approach of teaching Language Arts shows that, there is what could be referred to as a fragmentation of teaching instructions. Language Arts lessons are not taught in a single strand. On the time table, you will have reading in one lesson; other periods may focus on oral work, writing, comprehension teaching, English Sentence Patterns and structure (ESP&S) and so on. They are unaware of the fact that, Language should be taught in an integrated manner, taken into consideration the context in which learning is taken place. She therefore advocated for the implementation of the Integrated Language Arts Teaching Approach (ILATA). This approach brings together, all the language activities into one instructional session. During this session, children learn how to read, write, talk, think and listen<sup>8</sup>.

Although this approach is quite new in Sierra Leone, one could not say outright, that it is a new phenomenon in the field of Language Education. In the western terminology, this approach might be described as a "Balanced Instructional Approach in Reading" (BIAR), in which meaning is emphasized and phonics are combined. In every lesson, the teacher uses meaningful context to help children communicate orally and with printed words. For example, a teacher may use a story as a topic and contextualizes it to facilitate teaching and learning. The teacher can use it to teach letters, English Sentence Patterns and Structure (ESP&S) and writing etc. this lesson therefore will be coherent, a single experience through which learning is enhanced.

Teaching language Arts (English) through indigenous languages: Since folktales belong to the society and it is the responsibility of the community that owns them to maintain and transmit them from one generation to the other. The child therefore, before he begins school must have been acquainted with these tales. This provides a solid foundation for learning, as the process of learning starts from what the child knows to the unknown. Bucker. A., observed that: "we undertake the teaching of oral literature mainly because it is valuable educational experience contributing to the total growth and development and self- fulfillment of the person exposed to it". During the process of narrating the tale, the child is actively involved in the narration. This makes him/her to be more keenly observant and sensibly responsive towards himself, fellow human beings and his environment<sup>1</sup>. The stories narrated tend to reinforce the child's oral language abilities, moral and social conducts expected of members of the society.

**Research procedure and output:** To achieve the overall objectives of this studies, the research proceeded in the following order, which subsequent led to the outcomes presented:

**Objectives and hypotheses:** The specific objectives of this study include the following: i. To find out whether folktale in Kono can be effective for teaching language Arts (English) to children in primary school. ii. Discover possible teaching and learning materials from Kono folktale for the Language arts classroom. iii. To discover the possibility of using the Kono background of children to teach Language Arts (English).

**Limitation of the research:** The outstanding problem encountered is to get previous works on Kono oral literature adapted to teach language Arts. Another problem encountered in the process of collecting the data was with getting the storyteller or informant. Many were reluctant to avail themselves and the few that did, were expecting some financial benefits, as they thought that the exercise was a money making venture. However, neither of these limitations posed an obstacle to render the researcher incapable of carrying out this research.

### Methodology

The research was designed to collect the data through recording of story narrated by a native speaker of Kono and translated into English. Although very little dialectical variation occur in Kono, because the district is sharing boarders with the Republic of Guinea, Koinadugu, Tonkolili, Kailahun and Kenema Districts, there are bound to be Linguistic and cultural differences. The researcher therefore selected storyteller from the north, where the Kono spoken has not been influenced much compared to their counterparts in the south, who share boarders with the Mendes. The tribe they share boarders with is the Korankos, who belongs to Northern Mande Language group, of which also Kono belongs to. Their vocabularies are similar<sup>9</sup>. The story narrated was recorded vociferously in order to capture the natural atmosphere of storytelling. The researcher analyzed the data to capture the relevance of the story in teaching Language Arts (English)

### The presentation and discussion of findings

The tale selected for this work is: "The Hare and the other Animals". This tale was selected on the account of the following qualities. It has a rich moral lesson that will be of help to the children in reshaping their behaviors. Also, it is familiar and short. This offers an opportunity to easily write out the story in the chart and be further used as a comprehension passage for further lessons.

**The Hare and the other Animals:** Once upon a time there was a big famine; bags of food were donated to the Animals to be distributed among them. The bags were of various sizes,

including fifty (50) and twenty five Kilograms (25kg) bags. The animals assembled in a big market place to share the food.

The Hare small as he was, was unanimously chosen by the Animals to do the sharing. The major rule agreed upon was that, each and every Animal must accept with joy whatever was given to him/her. A long list including all the Animals was prepared and the sharing started. The Deer was given his, the Elephant was given his own and the Lion and all the animals were given theirs with the exception of the strong fat Wolf and the Hare. There were two bags of food left, the 25kg and the 50 kg bags. The Wolf took advantage of his size and rushed and took the 25kg bag, with the intension of given it to the Hare. The Hare been clever and smart, shouted to the hearing of the other Animals saying: "Big brother Wolf has taken his own share". All the other Animals applauded him and the Wolf had no alternative but accept what he has taken. He was shocked and disappointed. The Hare ended by taken the 50kg bag that was left over to him. Therefore, it pays to be wise like the Hare<sup>10</sup>.

The findings for the objectives set are presented and discuss as follow: **Objective A: To find out whether folktales in Kono can be effective for the teaching of language Arts (English) to children.** To capture the relevance of this story in teaching Language Arts (English), the teacher must first arouse the interest of the learners. He should start by saying that he has a very interesting story to narrate to them. He should narrate the story in a natural way, if possible demonstrate it. This activity can be done twice and after which extend the opportunity to the learners to retell or narrate the story. Also children must be given the opportunity to ask questions on certain areas that needs clarifications. This provides foundation for the children to develop literacy skills. In certain situations children should be encouraged to dramatize or role-play the role of the major characters. For example, a pupil could acts or plays the role of the Hare and the other the Wolf or the other Animals. This interaction will help the children to acquire good oral language skills at that tender age. This will also help him/her to make academic success and learn social skills.

Vocabulary development is another outcome that the child can acquire from this story. The process of vocabulary development helps the learners to improve their language competency and build vocabularies that will enhance communication and understanding. The advantage of building vocabulary in this manner is that, it is done in context and not in isolated teaching process. For example the following words from the story, could be used to teach this concept depending on the level of the learners: Famine, strong, donated, wise, Assemble, clever, disappointed etc.

The concept of phonemic awareness can also be taught from this story. Research conducted in Sierra Leone to determine the reading abilities of children in the lower primary school shows that not much attention is paid to this aspect. This has to be emphasized, as it deals with the smallest units of speech sounds,

which constitute a word. For example the following words from the story could be used to teach this concept: Big, small, wolf, Bag, size, wise.

Each of the letters from these words represents a sound. For example, the letter "b" in big and bag has the /b/ sound. Each of the letters can be isolated and their sounds taught. The teacher must emphasize the essence of understanding the initial phoneme sounds in words, as this can give a clue to the child what the word is.

Also comprehension and critical thinking are essential component of learning. The story narrated could be written on a chat and be subsequently used to teach comprehension. The teacher can ask questions to determine the following: i. Understanding the point in the story. ii. The child makes application of the story to life circumstance.

From this point, the moral lessons of the story can be identified together with the pupils. Ask the pupils if there are people in the class or their community that behave like a Hare or the Wolf.

**Objective B: Whether possible teaching and learning materials can be developed from the Kono folktale for the Language Arts classroom.** The teaching of Language Arts in our schools in Sierra Leone is impeded by the lack of adequate teaching and learning materials. There is therefore an urgent need to collect folktales in Kono and translate them into English. This action to some extent will go a long way in providing the much needed teaching and learning materials. The story written on a chat as a passage could be used to teach vocabulary and comprehension in subsequent lessons.

**Objective C: To discover the possibility of using the Kono background of children to teach Language Arts (English).** As the tale is the property of the community, this provides a unique opportunity for the child to learn with the help of the experience he has acquired at home. To accomplish this goal, folktales can be adapted to effectively teach Language Arts (English). The teaching and learning materials are readily available and culturally friendly to the learner as the tale belongs to the community. They have a rich background knowledge, which provides leverage for easy leaning. This further supports the concept that the mother tongue (L1) knowledge and experience can enhance literacy in the second Language (L2).

## Conclusion

This work focuses on using Kono folktale to teach Language Arts (English) in primary school in Sierra Leone. Considering the influx of foreign teaching and learning materials in the country, which in most cases are not in adequate supply; this justify the need to have teaching and learning materials that are locally developed and are culturally relevant to the learner. The tale is the property of the community and therefore the learners are familiar with it. This makes learning easier and comfortable.

Oral Literature is rich in entertainment and in the transmission of cultural information, this provides an opportunity for learning to occur naturally rather than using the coercive method, which has had very little impact on the learners. Also the experience the child has with the tale at home provides a unique opportunity and an adequate background for learners to acquire knowledge. Using folktales to teach Language Arts is an effective means through which the aspects of oral language skills, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development and the concept of comprehension and critical thinking can be taught. In this regard, a holistic approach is cultivated in the teaching of Language Arts (English). This approach is bound to succeed as the teaching and learning materials are available and are friendly to the learner.

### References

1. Bukennya A. et al (1994). Understanding Oral Literature. Nairobi, University Press.
2. Allie J.A.D. (1987). A New History of Sierra Leone. London, Longman Ltd.
3. Finnegan Ruth (2012). Oral Literature in Africa. Volume 1, Open Book Publisher, Mark Turin.
4. Flint, A. S. (2007). Literate lives: Teaching reading and writing in elementary classrooms. John Wiley & Sons.
5. Winsor P.J.T. (2009). The Language Experience Approach for Children Learning English. Canada. Portage and main Press.
6. Ministry of Education Science and Technology, Sierra Leone (MEST) (2010). Annual Education Sector Review – Final Report. Freetown, Sierra Leone.
7. Scholastic (2016). Folktales and Folklores everything you need. 16.02.16 www.scholastic.com
8. Kuyvenhoven J. (2013). Tell us a Story – poems and Stories for teaching Reading. Sierra Leone Education Consortium. Unpublished.
9. Manyeh M.K. (1987). Aspect of Kono Phonology. Leeds, University of Leeds. Ph. D. Thesis, unpublished.
10. SahrJimissa (2016). Kono Folktales and the Relevance in Teaching Language Arts. Njala University College, Sierra Leone.