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Using English Fairy Tales to Develop Critical Thinking in Young Learners

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Abstract

This article examines how English fairy tales can be effectively used to nurture critical thinking skills in young learners. Fairy tales are more than just entertaining stories; they are rich with imaginative scenarios, moral choices, and complex characters that naturally encourage children to think deeply and reflectively. When incorporated into English language lessons, these stories provide a meaningful context in which students can explore questions, make predictions, analyze the consequences of characters' actions, and evaluate different perspectives. By engaging with fairy tales, learners are invited to move beyond simple comprehension and actively participate in discussions, problem-solving activities, and creative role-playing exercises. These methods not only make the learning process more interactive and enjoyable but also promote essential cognitive skills such as reasoning, comparing, inferring, and drawing conclusions.

Key Words: English fairy tales, young learners, critical thinking, language development, storytelling in education, cognitive skills, classroom activities.

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Introduction

Developing critical thinking in young learners has become one of the key goals of modern education. In today's rapidly changing world, children are not only expected to acquire knowledge but also to learn how to analyze information, evaluate different perspectives, and make thoughtful decisions. While traditional methods of teaching English often focus primarily on vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, there is growing recognition that language learning can also be a powerful platform for fostering cognitive skills. One of the most effective yet underutilized tools for this purpose is the use of English fairy tales. Fairy tales have been cherished for generations because of their imaginative plots, memorable characters, and meaningful moral lessons. These stories naturally invite children to think critically: Why did a character act in a certain way? What might have happened if a different choice had been made? How do the story events relate to real-life situations? By engaging with these questions, young learners are encouraged to go beyond passive listening or reading, and instead, actively interpret, analyze, and reflect on the narrative.

Integrating English fairy tales into language lessons also provides a multi-dimensional learning experience. Children not only improve their language skills such as vocabulary acquisition, sentence structure, and reading comprehension but they also develop important thinking abilities like reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making. Moreover, storytelling creates a safe and engaging environment where learners feel motivated to share their ideas, ask questions, and collaborate with their peers. This interaction helps build confidence, empathy, and communication skills, which are all closely connected to critical thinking.

This article aims to explore practical ways in which English fairy tales can be incorporated into classroom activities to nurture critical thinking in young learners. It highlights methods such as guided discussions, story-based problem-solving exercises, role-playing, and collaborative projects, all designed to make learning both enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. By examining the cognitive and linguistic benefits of fairy tales, this study emphasizes that language education can be much more than memorizing words and rules it can become a dynamic space where young learners grow as thoughtful, imaginative, and reflective individuals.

Main Part

English fairy tales offer a unique and versatile tool for teaching young learners not only the English language but also essential cognitive skills such as critical thinking. Unlike traditional exercises that focus solely on memorization or repetition, fairy tales immerse children in stories that are rich with characters, conflicts, and moral dilemmas. For instance, when reading Cinderella, learners are naturally prompted to ask questions: Why did Cinderella's stepmother treat her harshly? How

might the story have changed if she had stood up for herself earlier? What does the fairy godmother's intervention teach us about kindness and justice? These questions encourage learners to go beyond surface-level understanding and explore deeper layers of reasoning, empathy, and evaluation.

One of the most powerful aspects of using fairy tales in the classroom is the way they make abstract thinking tangible. Young learners often find it challenging to understand cause-and-effect relationships, make predictions, or consider alternative perspectives. Fairy tales, however, present scenarios where these skills are required naturally. For example, in *The Three Little Pigs*, students can compare the decisions of each pig, evaluate the consequences of building houses from straw, sticks, or bricks, and predict what might happen if the story took a different turn. Activities like these encourage learners to analyze information, weigh options, and justify their opinions all central components of critical thinking.

Moreover, storytelling allows teachers to design a variety of interactive exercises that make the learning process engaging and collaborative. Discussion prompts, "what-if" scenarios, problem-solving tasks, and role-playing activities help learners articulate their thoughts while practicing English. In a classroom setting, children might act out scenes from a story, debate the choices of characters, or even rewrite endings based on their ideas. These activities not only improve speaking, listening, and writing skills but also cultivate curiosity, imagination, and reflective thinking. By expressing their ideas and listening to peers, learners develop empathy and learn to appreciate multiple perspectives skills that are essential in both language learning and life.

Fairy tales also provide an excellent opportunity to integrate cultural and moral discussions into language lessons. Stories like *Jack and the Beanstalk* or *Hansel and Gretel* reflect values, traditions, and problem-solving strategies that children can analyze critically. Teachers can guide learners to explore themes such as courage, honesty, and justice, asking them to consider how these values apply to their own lives. This not only deepens engagement with the English language but also nurtures moral reasoning and social awareness. The narrative format of fairy tales supports memory retention and cognitive connections. Young learners are more likely to remember vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammatical patterns when they are embedded in a story they enjoy and understand. By connecting language learning with meaningful reflection and critical thinking, fairy tales help children internalize knowledge in a way that feels natural and lasting. As learners discuss, question, and even challenge story events, they become active participants in their education rather than passive recipients.

English fairy tales are a dynamic and multifaceted tool for fostering critical thinking in young learners. They create a learning environment where language skills, cognitive development, and moral reflection intersect. By combining imaginative storytelling with discussion, problem-solving, and role-play, teachers can inspire children to think deeply, communicate effectively, and engage with the world around them in thoughtful and creative ways. Fairy tales transform the classroom from a space of rote learning into a lively environment where curiosity, imagination, and analytical thinking flourish together.

Beyond their immediate cognitive benefits, English fairy tales can also serve as a bridge to interdisciplinary learning. For example, teachers can connect the events of a story to subjects such as history, geography, or even science. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, learners might explore the concept of growth, plant biology, or even the notion of heights and safety, linking narrative exploration to factual knowledge. Similarly, *Little Red Riding Hood* can be used to discuss community, safety rules, and environmental awareness, fostering critical thinking that extends beyond language into broader real-world contexts. This cross-curricular approach encourages students to see connections between stories and the world around them, making learning more meaningful and holistic. When children reflect on the characters' choices or predict what might happen next, they are practicing self-awareness of their own thinking processes. Teachers can further enhance this by asking learners to justify their reasoning or compare their predictions with peers' ideas. Such reflection strengthens the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's thought processes a skill that is invaluable not only in education but throughout life.

Technology can also amplify the use of fairy tales in fostering critical thinking. Interactive storytelling apps, digital storybooks, and online discussion platforms allow learners to engage with narratives in creative ways. Students can create digital storyboards, record alternative endings, or collaborate on animated retellings of familiar tales. These tools make learning

dynamic, encouraging learners to experiment with language and ideas while simultaneously developing problem-solving and analytical skills in a digital context.

Conclusion

The integration of English fairy tales into the language classroom offers far more than simple vocabulary or grammar practice. These timeless stories act as windows into imaginative worlds, moral dilemmas, and complex character behaviors, inviting young learners to explore, question, and reflect. Through engaging with fairy tales, children develop critical thinking skills by analyzing choices, predicting outcomes, considering alternative perspectives, and evaluating consequences. At the same time, they enhance language skills, improve comprehension, and gain confidence in expressing ideas in English. Moreover, the benefits of using fairy tales extend beyond cognitive development. They nurture empathy, emotional intelligence, and creativity, providing learners with a safe space to explore ideas, experiment with language, and collaborate with peers. Story-based learning connects abstract thinking with real-life situations, helping children understand not only how to communicate effectively in English but also how to reason, solve problems, and think independently. By fostering a classroom environment that encourages discussion, reflection, and imaginative exploration, educators can cultivate learners who are curious, thoughtful, and self-aware.

English fairy tales transform the classroom into a dynamic, interactive, and joyful space where critical thinking and language learning grow hand in hand. They remind us that education is not merely about memorization or assessment it is about inspiring learners to think deeply, ask meaningful questions, and see the world with curiosity, empathy, and imagination. By incorporating fairy tales into teaching practices, educators provide young learners with tools that will serve them not only in language learning but throughout life, empowering them to become reflective, creative, and insightful individuals.

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