TEACHING GENDER AWARENESS THROUGH FAIRY TALES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Arisa Kochiyama
Wayo Women's University, Japan.
E-mail: kochiyama@wayo.ac.jp

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore how gender has been portrayed historically and in current times in fairy tales and then to introduce the effectiveness of using fairy tales in language instruction. While some instructors may still believe that teaching EFL encompasses focusing on linguistic elements only, recent trend in EFL teaching indicates the necessity of integrating literature in the curricula because of its rich potential to provide an authentic model of language use as well as its universal themes within human history. Traditional fairy tales and modern ones can allow students to think critically about how men and women are portrayed and to compare these portrayals with their own communities. It is hoped that discussion of the topic of gender issues can help students foster critical thinking and literacy and empower them with a further understanding of gender notions in their lives.
Keywords: *intercultural communication, English as a second language, EFL classroom*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature, in addition to being one of the favorite choices for reading among students as they are growing up, is commonly used in the context of reading practices in ESL/EFL classrooms (Lazar 1993). While some teachers tend to employ picture books and fairy tales because they think these materials provide students with an authentic model of language as well as the cultural information of target language, others point out that gender bias is still prevalent in children's literature and fairy tales (Kuo 2005). Gender bias is evident in fairy tales and children's literature as the males are seen as the rough, tough, adventurous, fighting, prince, heroic character while females are the sweet, beautiful princess, helpless, motherly, cleanly, damsel in distress. Though these roles are fun for story books they do not give readers a skewed perception on what their role should be in their real lives (Archer 2008). Among fairy tales, Disney stories

and movies are extremely popular and children for generations have grown up reading and watching them. Cook claims that although the stories are magical and fun they do show gender stereotypes and send incorrect messages to young children concerning their ability based on their gender creating gender stereotypes and influencing their attitudes and behaviors.

Disney is harmful not only with their production of books and movies but also with their variety of products consumed all over the world. Sales at Disney Consumer Products, which started the craze in 2000 by packaging nine of its female characters under one royal rubric, have shot up to $3 billion, globally in 2006. There are now more than 25000 Disney Princess items. Orenstein (2006) wrote how the toys and media industries had turned girls into "hypergendered" consumers. Orenstein, along with her 3-year-old daughter for her experiment, had to smile politely every time the supermarket-checkout

clerk greeted her with "Hi, Princess," ignored the waitress at their local breakfast joint who called the funny-face pancakes she ordered her "princess meal". But when the dentist pointed to the exam chair and said, "Would you like to sit in my special princess throne so I can sparkle your teeth?", she lost her temper and shouted, "Come on! It's 2006, not 1950. This is Berkley, California. Does every little girl really have to be a princess?"

Fairy tales often reflect society's socially accepted value. The stories tell us what gender scripts are accepted in our culture and how men and women should act. Although we tend to assume that we have achieved a more equalized society thanks to the feminist movement and the society has gotten much better in the perspective of gender stereotype, the princess craze and the girlie-girl culture are now more prevalent than ever all over the world. Given the above phenomena, the present study will firstly investigate whether the improved gender roles are represented in modern fairy tales and compare classic fairy tales with a modernized fairy tale, *Tangled*, published in 2010, with a focus on analysis of the story patterns, the heroines and other characters surrounding her. And then the study will discuss how traditional fairy tales and modern ones can allow students in the EFL classroom to think critically about gender roles both in the fairy tales and in their real lives.

METHOD

For the study, *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1957) will be analyzed as traditional fairy tales. These three stories have female characters that reflect society's socially accepted value of 1930s and 1950s. They all play similar roles of the damsel in distress. The heroines are all young and beautiful woman who can take care of a household. Secondly, a modernized fairy tale by Disney, *Tangled* (2010), will be analyzed and compared with the traditional fairy tales in terms of the story patterns, the heroines and other characters surrounding her. And then the study will discuss how teachers can promote students' gender awareness adopting traditional fairy tales and modern ones in their EFL classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Traditional Fairy Tales and Gender: Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty
Physical Appearance of Heroine

Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty all depict the heroines as a beautiful woman wearing nice clothing in order to be marriageable. With flowing strawberry-blond locks, big, blue eyes, button nose, and tiny body, Disney's child-like woman sets a standard for perfection that virtually no little girl can ever achieve (Pandolfo 2007).

> She was very pretty, with blue eyes and long black hair. Her skin was delicate and fair, and so she was called Snow White. Everyone was quite sure she would become very beautiful. (*Snow White*)

> When Cinderella entered the ballroom at the palace, a hush fell. Everyone stopped in mid-sentence to admire her elegance, her beauty and grace. (*Cinderella*)

> For a long time he stood gazing at her face, so full of serenity, so peaceful, lovely and pure, and he felt spring to his heart that love he had always been searching for and never found. (*Sleeping Beauty*)

In the three stories, the male heroes fall in love with the heroines because of how they look such as having beautiful locks, fair skin, tiny feet, and so

on. Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry (2003) who examined 168 Brothers Grimm fairy tales showed that 94 percent of the stories acknowledged physical appearance, and the average references per story were 13.6: In one story, there were 114 beauty references for women: In comparison, the number of beauty references for men did not exceed 35 per story. In these well know stories "good-temper and meekness are so regularly associated with beauty, and ill temper with ugliness, that this in itself must influence children's expectations" (Lieberman 1972). Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry (2003) worry that these powerful messages that say women need to be beautiful may compel some women to seek beauty at the expense of other pursuits, such as careers or education. Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry (2003) further point out that the continued emphasis on beauty is a way of society to controls girls and women. Women adopt behaviors that reflect and reinforce their powerlessness, which can lead to limiting a woman's personal freedom, power and control.

Heroine's Behavior

The traditional fairy tales also portray what is considered acceptable behavior for women. Their daily actions include singing, dancing and spending their day doing chores around the house such as cooking, cleaning, and making beds.

> I'll make them something to eat. When they come home, they'll be glad to find a meal ready." Towards dusk, seven tiny men marched homewards singing. But when they opened the door, to their surprise they found a bowl of hot steaming soup on the table, and the whole house spick and span. (*Snow White*)
> "You? My dear girl, you're staying at home to wash the dishes, scrub the floors and turn down the beds for your stepsisters. They will come home tired and very sleepy." (*Cinderella*)

Inge (2004) explains that the story of *Snow White* reflects the general public's attitude of the time that women should be primarily involved with the home. While men symbolize prosperity, income, and sustenance to support the women, the women are characterized as being the passive, pretty, patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet in the story. In line with Inge (2004), Archer (2008) points out that the heroines' submissive role as a woman suggests to viewers that girls need to be obedient and if girls do not have strong characters to relate to in stories then it is unlikely that they learn to become strong and independent women themselves.

Good = Pretty vs. Bad = Ugly

The traditional fairy tales have in common giving a message of the dichotomy of beautiful = good / ugly = bad; ugly people are evil and beautiful people are good. Women have to be either pretty or ugly and cannot be "average" because women are presented as either one thing or another and never a mixture of both. In the article "The Dualistic Nature of Women: Witches and Women in Fairy Tales," a writer points out that this repeated dichotomy is always applied to female characters in fiction in literature. As shown below in the traditional fairy tales evil ugly women who are jealous of heroines' beauty try to harm or kill the beautiful heroines.

> "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the loveliest lady in the land?" The reply was always: "You are, your Majesty," until the dreadful day when she heard it say, "Snow White is the loveliest in the land." The stepmother was furious and, wild with jealousy,

began plotting to get rid of her rival. (*Snow White*)
But her stepsisters were so jealous of Cinderella's beauty that they made her dress in rags and treated her like a servant. (*Cinderella*)

Synnott (1990) claims that judgements about appearance imply values about good and evil and these conclusions are often false, unfair, dangerous, and silly: Yet it is perpetuated by our language, literature, media, many philosophers and out simple binary perspectives. This assumption of ugly being bad has been labeled as "uglyism" (Synnott 1990). Synnott states that uglyism is the widespread discrimination experienced by people whose appearance lies south of beauty equator mapped out by literature and film. In her article "The Dualistic Nature of Women: Witches and Women in Fairy Tales," the writer points out that this binary polarization of women/men, good/bad, pretty/ugly must be stopped as human beings in reality are varying degrees of good and evil, of emotional and rational of inner and outer beauty.

Heroine and Prince
In the traditional fairy tales, the gender line between men and women is stereotyped with males being portrayed as being physically and emotionally strong, and as active participants in shaping their lives whereas females are portrayed as dependent, physically and emotionally weak, and passive participants in shaping their lives. In addition, the men are portrayed as much better off than the women. In the stories the male characters have higher ranking status and wealth. The three fairy tales also have in common that the male heroes who fall in love at first sight, save the females from a lifetime of hardship by marrying them while the females do nothing but waiti for the prince to show up.

Then one evening, they discovered a strange young man admiring Snow White's lovely face through the glass. After listening to the story, the Prince (for he was a prince!) made a suggestion. "If you allow me to take her to the Castle, I'll call in famous doctors to waken her from their peculiar sleep. She's so lovely. . . I'd love to kiss her. . . ! He did., and as though by magic, the Prince's kiss broke the spell. To everyone's astonishment, Snow White opened her eyes. She had amazingly come back to life! Now in love, the Prince asked Snow White to marry him, and the dwarfs reluctantly had to say good bye to Snow White. (*Snow White*)

At that kiss, the princess quickly opened her eyes, and wakening from her long long sleep, seeing the Prince beside her, murmured: "Oh, you have come at last! I was waiting for you in my dream. I've waited so long!" (*Sleeping Beauty*)

The most damaging Cinderella legacy of all, according to Pandolfo (2007), is the concept of "rags-to-riches" success through hard-work and patience, which reinforces capitalism. In addition with this "someday-my-Prince-will-come" message, it reinforces the notion that women should be passive, helpless and dependent who need the assistance of men and wait for men to save them. At the same time it offers the solution to girls that marriage is the answer to everything (Wakakuwa 2003).

Modernized Fairy Tale and Gender: Tangled
Tangled is a 2010 American animated musical film and story produced and published by Walt Disney Animation Studios and is the 50th animated feature in the Walt Disney Animated Classic Series. The story is loosely based on the Grimm fairy tale

"Rapunzel" in the collection of folk tales published by the Brothers Grimm. The film tells the story of a lost princess with long magical hair who yearns to leave her secluded tower. Against Mother Gothel's wish, she enlists the aid of a bandit thief Flynn to take her out into the world which she has never seen.

Physical Appearance of Heroine

Rapunzel is not overly described as pretty or beautiful as in the heroines of *Snow White, Cinderella, or Sleeping Beauty*. The only sentence that mentions Rapunzel's beauty is that she was born as a beautiful baby.

> The flower made the Queen well, and she soon gave birth to a beautiful young girl. (*Tangled*)

Heroine's Behavior

Unlike the heroines of traditional fairy tales, Rapunzel is presented as a smart, brave, and adventurous woman who stands up for her beliefs. In the first scene of *Tangled*, it becomes clear that a new heroine has been created. Rapunzel who wishes to get out of her secluded tower lies to Mother Gothel, Rapunzel's evil abductress. so that she leaves the tower for three days.

> Realizing she would never get out of the tower unless she took matters into her own hands, Rapunzel asked for another birthday present. She requested special paint that would require Mother to leave on a three-day journey. (*Tangled*)

> Rapunzel takes charge by knocking out a male protagonist Flynn, tying him up and striking adeal to make him help her.

> Not wasting another second, Rapunzel dragged Flynn out of the closet and offered him a deal. If Flynn

took her to see the floating lights and returned her home safely, she would give him the satchel. Flynn had no choice but to agree. (*Tangled*)

Rapunzel is different from the classic heroines who are passive and obedient and described as a courageous young woman relentlessly pursues her goals to achieve personal fulfillment. Unlike in the classic fairy tales, cooking, doing dishes, cleaning houses, and sewing are not mentioned as Rapunzel's behavior.

Good = Pretty vs. Bad = Ugly

The repeated dichotomy of good/evil, ugly/beautiful is again applied to the female character in *Tangled*. While Rapunzel is presented as a pretty young girl, Mother Gothel, Rapunzel's evil abductress, is described as having dark hair and dark slant eyes and in need of Rapunzel's magical power to stay young. In the last scene, as Gothel loses Rapunel's magical power, she becomes an ugly old wicked witch just as seen in the stepmother of *Snow White*.

> Mother Gothel knew that if she wanted to stay young, she had to keep the child with her always. (*Tangled*)

> "What have you done?!" Mother Gothel cried. Within moments she aged hundreds of years and turned to dust. (*Tangled*)

Thus the story keeps with the tradition of association with women as witches and the role women as the other.

Heroine and Prince

The heroine of *Tangled* is not a prince as in the traditional fairy tales but a bandit thief who belongs to Lower class in society, which shows Disney's new perspective of gender. Rapunzel is not a princess waiting for a man to wake her up, untie her from the train tracks,

and so on. Although the story loosely follows the traditional Rapunzel story, Disney makes some changes which balance out the value of genders.

> Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, <u>a thief named Flynn Rider</u> was on the run with his partner in crime, the Stabbington brothers. (*Tangled*)

> Rapunzel is anything but passive and is routinely the one who takes charge and gets them out of tough situations.

> Rapunzel banged her frying pan on a giant pot to get the thug's attention. <u>She asked them to let Flynn go</u> so that she could make her dream come true. (*Tangled*)

Tangled doesn't end with the traditional "someday-my-Prince-will-come" message but with the suggestion that Rapunzel eventually becomes the leader of her kingdom, which makes her the only princess who eventually becomes a true queen.

> The King and Queen were there, along with Flynn, Pascal, Maximus and the pub thugs. The people of the kingdom released floating lanterns into the sky. Their light had guided their princess home at last. (*Tangled*)

Disney has developed a strong female character because that is what modern culture and society have demanded. The modernized fairy tale *Tangled* is a step forward for Disney because it has given the heroine her independence and attempted to give us an empowered three-dimensional female character differing from her predecessors who wait for a prince to rescue them and marry them. Given these findings, how can we teach gender awareness in the EFL classroom using the fairy tales?

Traditional fairy tales and modernized ones allow students not only to learn the target language but also to think critically about how men and women are portrayed and compare these portrayals to their own lives.

Kuo (2005) claims the importance of teacher's role by pointing out that teachers need to be extremely aware of the fact that dominant reading practices will make students accustomed to mainstream texts and as a result students will passively identify themselves with the characters in the stories. Kuo suggests that teachers should equip students with a certain stance that deliberately challenges the text and help students uncover the gender inequalities present in the text, in doing so, it is useful for teachers to adopt resistant or oppositional reading practices rather than dominant and conventional reading practices. According to the BC Teacher's Federation, a familiar starting point for students would be to read traditional fairy tales and identify the elements that make it different from a non-fiction story by asking open-ended questions as in the following:

1) How are princesses usually portrayed at the start of a story?
2) Is she waiting around for something or someone to come to her rescue or make her happy? If so, whom?
3) Towards the end of a story what makes Cinderella and Snow White happy? Why do you think that might be? (BC Teacher's Federation) After reading a variety of traditional and modernized fairy tales and analyzing components of each style of fairy tale, teachers can ask students:
4) In you world, who is a more realistic character? Why do you think that? Who does each princess remind you of in real life?
5) Can a prince or princess be single and live happily ever after? Why

or why not? Do you know anyone who is single and happy? (BC Teacher's Federation)

As for the possible extensions, BC Teacher's Federation suggests the following strategies:

1) Have students take a traditional fairy tale and work together in small groups to write a new ending for it. Ask them to create one where the princess and prince live in a more realistic and independent manner.

2) Ask students to write their own fracture/non-traditional fairy tale where the prince or princess is portrayed in a non-gender specific role. Tell them you are looking for non-sexist behavior in at least one character. (BC Teacher's Federation)

CONCLUSION

The present study investigates whether the improved gender roles are represented in modern fairy tales and compared classic fairy tales with a modernized fairy tale, *Tangled*, published in 2010, with a focus on analysis of the story patterns, the heroines and other characters surrounding her. And then the study suggested some lesson plan on how traditional fairy tales and modern ones can allow students in the EFL classroom to think critically about gender roles both in the fairy tales and in their real lives. It was found out that teachers could empower students with critical thinking by utilizing both traditional and modernized fairy tales through resistant or oppositional reading practices and help students make better sense of the text by approaching the text from multiple and alternative perspectives.

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