

Storytelling among Children: A Survey

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ABSTRACT: Oral tradition is the reminiscence of the past, transferred via storytelling, known in specified cultural anthropology. More than any other form and genre, storytelling influences the children through their powerful narration. Culture and tradition are passed on from one generation to another through folklores and folktales. Indian folktales like Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, and Jataka are noteworthy culture-based narratives with anthropomorphic (animals having the human traits) characters. The research paper employs the questionnaire method to understand children's involvement and interest in reading and listening to anthropomorphic stories. The respondents are children in the age group of 10 to 12 years from Tanjore (Thanjavur) district, Tamilnadu, India. The questions were based on the choice of stories they listen to and books they read, how and why they relate themselves to the anthropomorphic characters, parent's and teacher's involvement in storytelling. Both animal and non-animal (human) stories were narrated to children to identify their (boys and girls) interest in culture and tradition they belong to. The story observation leads to creative thinking and a broader perspective on gender classifications in children. The study reveals the positive impact of storytelling on children, thereby developing language skills and their understanding of gender and culture.

KEYWORDS: Oral tradition, Culture, Storytelling, Anthropomorphism, Gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Stories make our lives worth living” - Anne Bernard

The society and culture shape a child's behavior and lifestyle. A child's growth depends on their ability to understand the attributes of the socio-cultural manner (mannerism, practice, process). Wray, Bloom and Hall pointed out that “children are born into a social world” and that ‘children born into cultural groups are inducted into the values, attitudes, and beliefs of that group’’. (Wray, 1989). For social progress, a child must learn the customs of their culture and the role it has on their life. For a long time, culture and tradition are transmitted from generation to generation. Rodriguez says, “Storytelling is at the core of culture”. It shares customs, traditions, and brings history to life. Listening to stories guide children and change socio-cultural attributes. Naturally, children find delight in stories, and it edifies their knowledge about culture. Exposure of children to stories from different parts of the world opens up their knowledge and appreciates tolerance and understanding towards other cultures.

Storytelling is as old as communication, and it has connected people from a very long time, also creates interest among children. Storytelling is not just utterance of words; the expressions and gestures make the listener emotionally connect to the stories. Since storytelling began with primitive humans, animals were a part of their stories. Later humans found habitable lands and favorable conditions for settlement, remain dependant on animals. The animals, once considered as hostile to humans, were personified as characters in stories. Further, animals were given human attributes and thus anthropomorphism came into existence. “Primitive story-tellers used animals as antagonists to dramatize man's ceaseless (Magee, 1969), struggle against the forces of nature”. Small children will probably continue to find delight in their pets, in wild creatures, and animals in zoos, and also in the world of fantasy inhabited by talking animals, (Markowsky, 1975). The research paper employs the questionnaire method to understand children's involvement and interest in reading and listening to anthropomorphic stories.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is designed to understand the insight of children about stories. The respondents were selected under purposive sampling. The questions help to understand the children's perspective on stories and storytelling. Two stories were narrated to the children and the asset of questionnaires administered to identify the transfer of culture that occurs through storytelling among children. The stories were narrated in both English and their first (native) language (Tamil) for better understanding. The first questionnaire consists of ten close-ended questions and the second questionnaire with nine close-ended questions and one open-ended question. Students were given fifteen minutes to fill each question set. To enhance their creativity through storytelling, students were made to narrate stories with different and captivating ending to well-known titles like The Crocodile and The Monkey, The Lion and The Rabbit, The Jackal and The Lion, etc. The sample size of the study is 137 students (68 boys and 69 girls) of age group 10–12 years. The students belong to private and government-aided schools of Tamilnadu, Thanjavur. This study uses a simple percentage method to bring out the children's interest level in stories and storytelling. The questions were based on the choice of stories they listen to, books they read, how and why they relate themselves to the anthropomorphic characters.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The complex avenues in children's literature have always been a focus of research. Dale Gilbert Jarvis in his work, "Not in My Time, and not in Your Time...": Storytelling, Change, and the Oral Tradition in Newfoundland and Labrador" (Jarvis, 2015) defines storytelling as an oral interactive art of using words to reveal the elements and images of a story, while encouraging creativity and imagination of the listener. This article considers only the stories narrated from the mind and not that is read from a printed or in any other medium. Gilbert's audience is an integral part of the tradition of storytelling and, as such demands a certain type of active listening, where the listener fills in, with his or her imagination, images drawn by the storyteller's words. This article focuses largely on the storytelling tradition of European settlers to Newfoundland and Labrador and traces the development of a distinctive, localized body of storytelling material, including folktales, statements of folk belief, local legends, and recitation. The article concludes on a positive note that the oral tradition is not going to die in Newfoundland and Labrador. Rebecca Isbell et al. in their article "The Effects of Storytelling and Story Reading on the Oral Language Complexity and Story Comprehension of Young Children" (Isbell, 2004) explain, how the combination of story narration and reading, approach provide powerful literature experience to influence the oral language development and story comprehension of young children—critical factors involved in their literacy development. Asta Cekaite and Polly Björk-Willén in their work "Enchantment in storytelling: Co-operation and participation in children's aesthetic experience" (Cekaite, 2018) states the children's emotional involvement and aesthetic experience in adult's storytelling and highlights the early childhood literacy and toddler's aesthetic experiences. Juliet Kellogg Markowsky jots May Hill Arbuthnot's three categorization of animal stories and explains the usage of anthropomorphism, as to make the readers identify themselves with animals, for a flight of fantasy, variety, and humor in "Why Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature?" (Markowsky, 1975). Queenie Yu in the article, "Children's Storytelling Within Common World Pedagogies: A Literature Review" (Yu, 2018) focuses on children's everyday practices and experiences in the natural world and how it could be implicated and supported by common world pedagogies. This literature review acts as a catalyst for further conversations and dialogue that considers how children's storytelling is supported through common worlds pedagogies. Johanna Källström et al. in "Gendered Storytelling: A normative evaluation of gender differences in terms of decoding a message or theme in storytelling" (Peterson, 2017) highlights the mesmerizing capability of storytelling from ancient to modern era. The stories in those days were meant for teaching morality but in the modern days for business and other purposes. The article deals with the usage of storytelling as a tool to investigate the gender differences within the areas of marketing communications. If the target is male, then the story is woven around the heroic character of men's interest. The study proves that the change in the theme or the content of the story depends on the gender of the audience. The insights gained through the review of literature lead to the framing of the questionnaire and understand the positive influence of storytelling among students.

IV. MATERIALS

4.1 Questionnaire-1

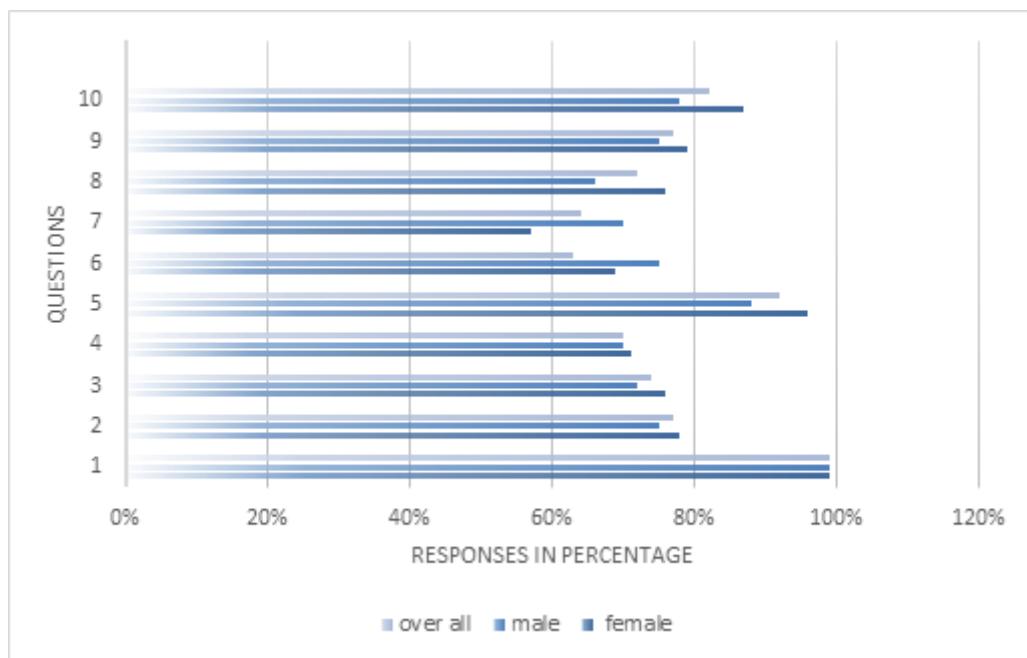


Figure 1. Questionnaire Result 1

Table 1. Responses to the first questionnaire in percentage

1	Fondness for stories	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		99%	99%	99%	1%	1%	1%
2	Interest in reading stories	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		78%	75%	77%	22%	25%	33%
3	Preference in listening or reading to stories	Listening			Reading		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		76%	72%	74%	24%	28%	26%
4.	Prefer stories on animals or human	Animal Stories			Human Stories		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		71%	70%	70%	29%	30%	30%
5	The likeness of animals in stories	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		96%	88%	92%	4%	12%	10%
6	Awareness of the term "Anthropomorphism."	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		69%	75%	63%	31%	25%	37%
7	Story narration by parents and teachers	Parents			Teachers only		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		57%	70%	64%	43%	30%	36%

8	Experience in narrating stories	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		76%	66%	72%	24%	34%	28%
9	Listening to stories from grandparents	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		79%	75%	77%	21%	25%	23%
10	Liking for Indian stories	Indian			Others		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		87%	78%	82%	13%	22%	18%

The study findings show that almost 99% of the students like stories, out of which 77% of them read stories. They were asked about their preference for listening or reading stories, 74% of students favored listening, whereas only 24% of students chosen reading, which expresses that the majority of them love listening to stories. Though not fully aware of the term anthropomorphism, most of the students, i.e., 90% like animal characters in the stories and 70% like animal stories. The data shows that around 70% of children listen to stories from their parents and grandparents, whereas 30% listen to stories from their teachers. Parents narrating stories to their children have a positive effect on their social development. Kids listening to stories develop an ability and talent towards storytelling. 72% of children love narrating stories. Stories teach the history and culture of a nation to students when it comes to their predilection, 82% of students like Indian stories in comparison to other stories. Children's exposure to regional stories boosts up their attachments towards the regional stories. 72% of children love narrating stories, which proves that listening to stories creates interest and progresses the narration skill too. Two stories in the Indian context, The Rabbit and The Lion from Panchatantra folktale and Four Friends from Indian folktales, were narrated to students. The Rabbit and The Lion highlight the human virtue, as well as wit, is superior to brute force, and Four Friends brings out the Indian cultural logic with wit. The rationale behind the selection is that stories were rooted in Indian culture and animal stories.

4.2 Questionnaire-2

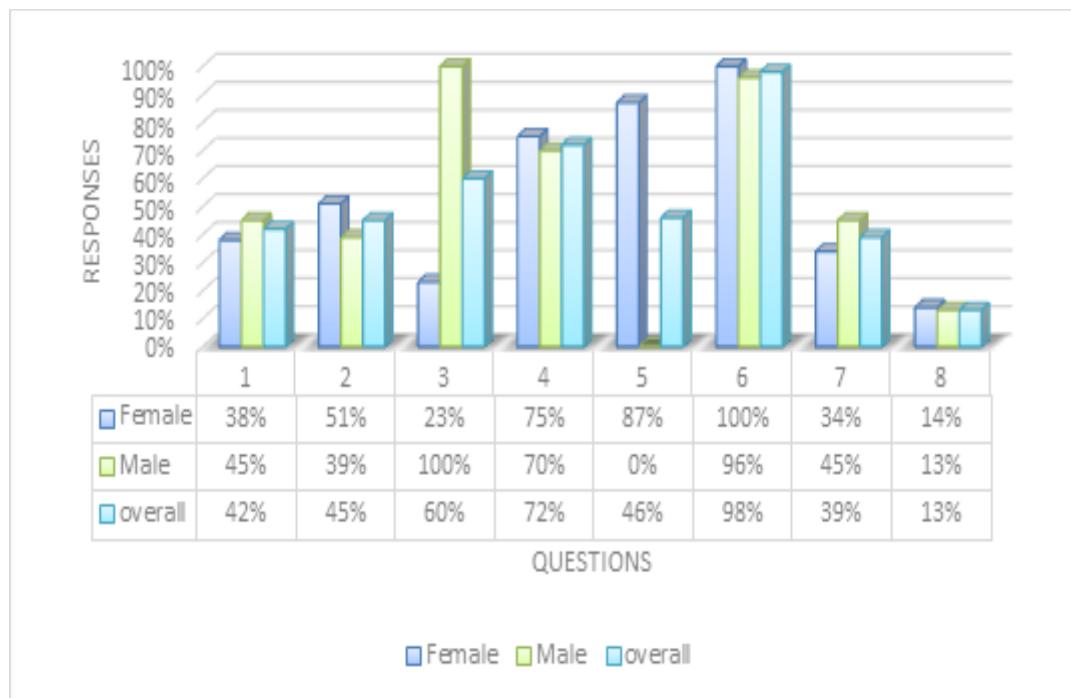


Figure 2. Questionnaire Result 2

Table 2. Responses to Second questionnaire in percentage

1	Favorite character in the story	Animal Character			Human Character		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		38%	45%	42%	62%	55%	58%
2	Favorite story- Stories on animal or human	Animal stories			Human stories		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		51%	39%	45%	49%	61%	55%
3	Gender preference	Boy			Girl		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		23%	100%	60%	77%	0%	40%
4	Stories help in solving problems	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		75%	70%	72%	25%	30%	28%
5	Preference in the choice of books	Fairy tale			Adventurous		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		87%	0%	46%	13%	99%	54%
6	Understanding of culture through story narration	Indian culture			Western culture		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		100%	96%	98%	0%	4%	2%
7	Belief in superstition	Yes			No		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		34%	45%	39%	66%	55%	61%
8	Knowledge on anthropomorphism	Human picture			Anthropomorphic picture		
		Female	Male	Overall	Female	Male	Overall
		14%	13%	13%	86%	87%	87%

Post-narration, a second questionnaire with nine close-ended, and one open-ended question were distributed among the students. The questions were based on the characters, gender, and the cultural aspects that could be interpreted through stories. An examination of the second questionnaire displays that 42% of the students like animal character and 58% of the students like human characters, whereas 45% of the students like animal stories and 55% like human stories. On their gender preference of the character, 60% of the respondents liked boys and 40% towards the girl. The reaction to the cultural setup of the Four Friends, 98% of their response was Indian culture while a negligible 2% responded as western culture. The narration of traditional tales in the classroom is “a positive way of expanding children’s experience of different cultures and a means by which they become aware of the parallels with their own”. (Burgess, 1988). 72% of the students thought that stories helped them to solve real-life problems. In response to the choice of books among fairy tales and adventure stories, the students’ favorite was 46% fairy tales and 54% adventure stories. Answering their belief in superstition, 39% said that they believed, and 61% do not have a belief in superstition. To re-authenticate their ideas on anthropomorphism, two images were given with human characters and animal characters, 87% answered them correctly, and 13% answered it wrongly. Eight of the nine close-ended questions were in binary (yes or no); the question was about children’s learning from stories, had four options (Fig.2).

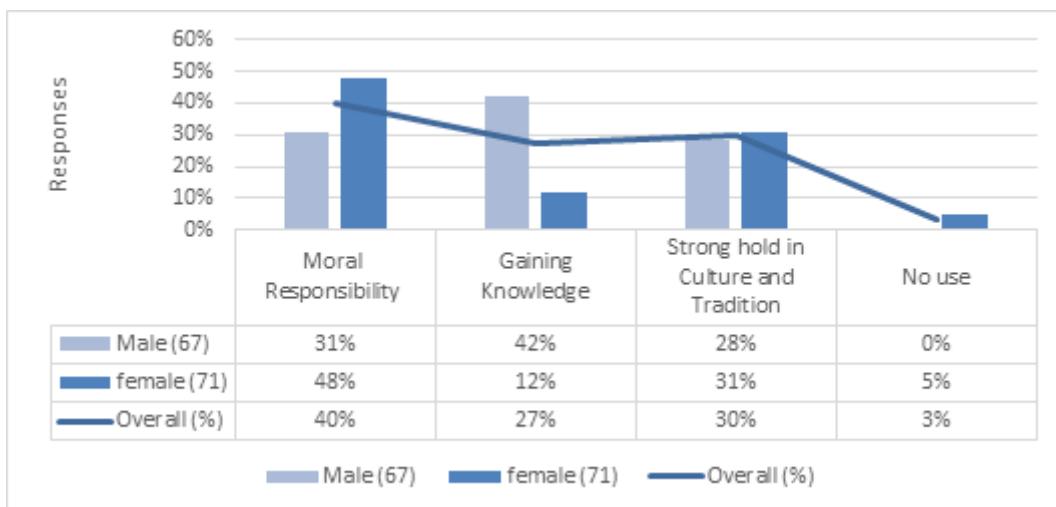


Figure 2. Benefits or Importance of Storytelling among Children

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Everyone loves stories; children are no exception; 99% of the children like stories, though there are different types of stories, the study focused on the animal stories as anthropomorphism was the intended focus of the study. The study also dwelled into the cultural and gender aspects of storytelling at a rudimentary level. Students' interest in listening to stories rather than reading reflects that they are interested in interaction; it also disproves the notion of Gen Z's obsession for technology that leads to a decrease in socialization. "Storytelling events are thereby interactional practices that allow children, together with adults, in co-operative actions – to engage in social cognition as well as to learn to differentiate and reintegrate social relations, the causality of action, and affect, thus becoming a member of their community. Importantly, for the young listeners' storytelling is closely linked to entertainment, enchantment, and fun." (Cekaitė, 2018) Children being exposed to stories at an early age induce their interest in reading literature. In Tamilnadu, Students attuned to focus on the curriculum and syllabus; therefore, there is less readership for literature in Tamilnadu. However, students responding that they hear stories from teachers is hopefully useful. "Listening to stories read aloud extended children's ability to understand the experience and enabled them to assimilate 'the more powerful and more abstract mode of representing experience that is made available by written language'". (Wells, 1987) 36% of the students have responded that they listen to stories, only from their teachers; this response raises a query about those students' communication with their parents. The study did not dwell into that aspect of the question; the students would have perceived literary stories and could have let the real-life narration of their parents from stories.

Children's interest and love for animals encourage them to listen to animal stories. The technique of giving human traits and emotion to animals in stories has been employed for a very long time; it makes the unfamiliar appear to be more familiar to the listener or the reader. It takes them to the world of animals where they learn about animals and also human traits. The stories have a broader appeal among children and help them learn literary terms. Therefore, a large number of anthropomorphized animal characters are found in children's stories, books, cartoons, and animated films. According to the study, an average of 81% of children like animals in the stories. The stories narrated before answering the second questionnaire could have influenced the students' likeness to animal stories and human stories. In the first questionnaire, we find that 70% like animal stories and 92% like animals in the stories, so on average, it is inferred that 81% of the students like animals. The stories influence the characters chosen by the student; post narration, the upvote for human characters was high compared to the animal characters. It is also visible that the children's interest heightens with the presence of human characters in the stories.

Stories usually embrace the tradition, experience, and imagination of the storytellers, with 77% of students listening to stories from their grandparents; there is no wonder that almost 82% of students' like Indian stories. An individual creates interest in things, habits, and customs they are exposed to. 18% of students inspired by the foreign stories are not just because of their exposure to western or foreign stories, but their conscious knowledge of foreign tales and their influence of dominant west animated movies and cartoons.

The scrutiny of the second questionnaire brings out that storytelling imbues culture in children. The oral tradition of storytelling passes on the history and culture of the country. The students are expected to answer which character they liked in the story that was narrated to them, 58% of the students like the human characters. The cultural aspects of human stories got the attention towards the human character than animal character.

“Margaret Mead realized that the difference between the sexes is one important condition upon which mankind has built the many varieties of human culture that gives human beings dignity and stature”. (Mead, 1935). The gender selection of the character displays an overt depreciation shown by boys towards girls. The question was about character selection based on the two anthropomorphized boy and girl images. The data portrays that 60% of the students like boys and 40% of them like girl characters. Though the result seems to be a little balanced, insightful analysis stress that no boys have selected the girl character, Johnson et al. (Johnson, 1984), also found that boys and girls prefer stories with the protagonist of their gender. But around 23% of the girls like boy character. The reason might be the depiction of male characters in stories. On the whole, it is clear that boys like male main characters, and girls’ female main characters in stories. The variation between the selection of books is different from male to female. The male choice is adventure stories and female’s fairy-tale, but the end result is children love stories.

VI. CONCLUSION

Storytelling assists a child to experience the world from different aspects, whereas anthropomorphism creates engagement or concentration among children. The combination of anthropomorphism and storytelling emphasis the value of culture and identify the nature of a person within the cultural context. As oral tradition and folktales are rich in tradition and ancient culture, it inculcates cultural values in children. The questionnaire served the purpose of the pilot study in understanding the methods and needs to carry forward the research on stories and storytelling. The students’ priorities from the survey also advance the education sector to provide quality education with students’ choice of likeability into the curriculum to achieve the educational goal. This questionnaire evaluates the influence of stories among children; the data vividly portrays that children learn cultural values through stories, which in turn, bring an understanding of the conflicts faced by an individual and society. Therefore, it is evident that storytelling has transferred culture, and social behaviors to the children. The stories not only connect us to the past and express superstitious beliefs to recognize the reality but also improve a better knowledge of social surroundings. Reading stories helps us to empathize with others. Stories make sense of time, history, and life.

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