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**USING NASREDDIN HODJA STORIES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CLASSROOMS<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

Culture is an indispensable dimension of human life and also foreign language teaching and learning process; and as a part of the current trend, diverse cultural elements are covered in recently published English as a foreign language (EFL) coursebooks. These cultural elements are not limited to the target culture but they cover local and international culture components as well. Not focusing on solely one specific culture enables language learners to touch different cultures as well as maintaining awareness of their own culture. Humour constitutes another aspect without which human beings cannot survive. Our daily lives are full of humorous elements like jokes and these add remarkable taste to human beings' course of living. This positive prevalence of humour in human life may also have its reflections in the realm of language teaching. Considering the inseparableness of both culture and humour from human life, Nasreddin Hodja stories can ideally serve a double purpose while teaching English in EFL settings. When offered in English, these culturally embedded and humour-laden stories that wittily combine both local culture and humorous elements hold the potential to motivate both English language teachers and learners while teaching and learning English in Turkish EFL context. This study aims to discuss the possible ways to employ Nasreddin Hodja stories in Turkish EFL classrooms. To this end, sample to-the-point activities based on Nasreddin Hodja stories in English will be introduced for different language skills ranging from main skills like reading and speaking to sub-skills like vocabulary and grammar.

**Keywords:** Nasreddin Hodja, literature, culture, humour, language teaching

**1. Introduction**

Nasreddin Hoca, or other versions in English like Nasreddin Hodja, Hodja Nasreddin, Mulla(h) Nasruddin, the Hodja, or Effendi refers to a well-known humorous figure in the region of Middle East. Different countries claim that the Hodja belongs to their own culture and thus try to gain and enjoy the possession of an important cultural asset. For instance, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey are the foremost countries that put forward reasonable explanations that Nasreddin Hodja is a product of their own culture. However, no matter which culture he belongs to, Nasreddin Hodja turns out to be a universal value and we should focus on the stories of this folk philosopher as a universal heritage. In accordance with this understanding, 1996 was declared International Nasreddin Year by UNESCO. This universality of the Hodja can be summarized as follows:

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In Turkey, he is known as Nasreddin Hodja of Anatolia, a historical character from the days of Seljuk rule in what we in the West know as the Middle Ages. Nasreddin, Nasrudin, or Nasruddin is claimed as well by Afghans, Iranians, Uzbeks, and Arabs, as well as the Turkic Xinjiang area of western China. Since the Seljuk empire of 1000-1400 stretched from Turkey to the Punjab in India, as did the Achmaenid empire a thousand years earlier, carrying enlightening stories (along with war) from east to west and back again, such a personage as Nasruddin can well be shared by all, whether as Nasreddin Hodja or Mulla Nasruddin. (<http://www.nasruddin.org/index.html>, paragraph 2)

Nasreddin Hodja is a figure familiar to all people from almost all ages. His stories are commonly told by people orally and these stories constitute a significant part in literature. In Turkey, for example, there are a number of printed materials that cover such stories. If these stories can be used while teaching Turkish to children in Turkey, the English version of Nasreddin Hodja stories can surely be employed while teaching English in Turkey. A simple research on the Nasreddin Hodja stories in English makes it clear that there is an abundance of resources to be used for this specific purpose.

## 2. The Use of Nasreddin Hodja Stories in EFL Classes

The coverage of Nasreddin Hodja stories offers three main aspects of contribution for language learning process: culture, literature, and humour.

### 2.1 Culture

Culture is an indispensable component of human life and every event, task, or action about human beings somehow involves culture. As language and culture form an inseparable match, language learning process inevitably covers cultural issues to a notable extent. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) introduce three categories for the cultural coverage in language teaching: source culture, target culture, and international culture. Likewise, McKay (2000) mentions a similar categorization: target culture materials, learners' own culture materials, and international target culture materials. In the past, it was strictly asserted that language learning should cover solely target culture elements. However, with the advent of new paradigms in education and language teaching, it has been understood that cultural coverage should be based on a sheer balance of cultural components from different sources. That is, content from source culture, target culture, and other cultures should be blended in a balanced way. Alptekin (2002) attracts attention to intercultural communicative competence for language learners and suggests that "instructional materials and activities should involve local and international contexts that are familiar and relevant to language learners' lives" (p. 63).

Nasreddin Hodja stories, under this framework, can be considered as an invaluable component of the source culture for Turkish EFL learners. As they are known and enjoyed by people from different age groups, the coverage of these stories while teaching English at different levels offers an important opportunity for learners to contact source culture elements in EFL classrooms in

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Turkey. Especially by creating an atmosphere of familiarity and closeness, these stories can make a boosting effect on learners' motivation and effective learning.

## 2.2 Literature

Literature is one of the most important assets of a culture. Principally based on language, it encompasses a vast area and holds great potentials for language teaching and learning. Different products of literature like poetry, short stories, novels, novellas, and so on can be employed for language teaching or learning purposes. Lazar (1993) lists some reasons for using literature while teaching languages:

- it is very motivating
- it is authentic material
- it has general educational value
- it is found in many syllabuses
- it helps students to understand another culture
- it is a stimulus for language acquisition
- it develops students' interpretative abilities
- students enjoy it and it is fun
- it is highly valued and has a high status
- it expands students' language awareness
- it encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings (p. 14)

As the above list makes it evident, literature holds a strong potential to be useful for language education. Authenticity, motivating effect, rich language content, etc. can be counted among factors that allow language learners who study on pieces of literature to feel a real sense of achievement. Nasreddin Hodja stories may not be stories by Edgar Allan Poe nor a novel by Jane Austen; however, embody a living and colourful side of literature and serve most of the justifications of using literature in EFL contexts. The coverage of literature in language education is ideally based on unabridged and unsimplified versions of texts. Thus, such versions of Nasreddin Hodja stories will be better to use in language classes. Nevertheless, simplified versions for lower levels can be employed and can yield quite positive results for the improvement of foreign language skills.

## 2.3 Humour

Humour is a sine-qua-non for our daily lives. But for humour, there would not be actions like smiling or laughing, and life would turn into a monotonous black-and-white process. However, the nature of human beings needs some colourful touches. This need can also be felt in education. The ice in the classroom needs to be broken so that learning becomes more meaningful and joyful.

As for language teaching and learning, humour can be added to the process in numerous ways (Tuncay, 2007). A simple joke, an unexpected riddle, a funny visual, an interesting video, or a witty

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text can bring humour to the classroom. Medgyes (2001) asserts that 'the English lesson is an ideal arena to trigger laughter...Far more so than any other lesson' (p. 111). According to Medgyes (2002), humour in language classes;

- is a good vehicle for providing authentic cultural information;
- builds bridges between cultures;
- practices language items in genuine contexts;
- brings students closer together;
- releases tension;
- develops creative thinking;
- provides memorable chunks of language;
- reinforces previously learned items;
- generates a happy classroom;
- enhances motivation;
- enriches textbook-based courses;
- introduces a refreshing change from routine language-learning procedures (p. 5)

Nasreddin Hodja stories are highly humour-laden texts. They offer short and concise but smart and witty readings for learners. Accordingly, they possess a high potential to enhance motivation and learning in foreign language classes and lower anxiety. The nature of Nasreddin Hodja stories is so eligible for classroom use because they combine humour elements with didactic components. While studying on the witty answers given by the Hodja, the learners are also oriented to think critically. Thus, while developing language skills, students can find the opportunity to develop other important skills like critical thinking and creativity. As most of the Nasreddin Hodja stories are known by Turkish EFL learners, studying on the English versions of them can also enable them to develop comparison skills. Considering that these stories can be effectively used while teaching Turkish as a foreign language (Akkaya, 2013), their use in EFL learning settings may be quite promising in terms of motivation enhancement and skills development.

### **3. Some Resources for Nasreddin Hodja Stories**

Nasreddin Hodja stories are originally a part of oral narration tradition. However, these stories also exist in written form in various languages ranging from English to Russian. Thanks to the lingua franca status of English, the English versions of the stories are more readily available in both printed and virtual form. The accessible resources in English may both be originally written in English and be translated into English from Turkish. The ones that are originally in English can be preferred in terms of authenticity. However, even the ones translated from Turkish into English can be so useful considering their valuable contributions for language learning. Some of the printed and internet resources are listed below.

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### 3.1 Printed Resources

*202 Jokes of Nasreddin Hodja* by Orient Publishing: This book covers 202 different stories of Nasreddin Hodja. With its broad coverage of the stories, it can be regarded as an important resource.

*Folktales from Turkey: from Ağrı to Zelve* by Serpil Ural (2012): This book presents various stories in English from different regions of Anatolia including some Nasreddin Hodja stories.

*Jokes from Nasreddin Hodja (Stage 2)* by Ertan Ardanancı (2014): This book presents some Nasreddin Hodja stories in an abridged form (stage 2).

*Jokes from Nasreddin Hodja (Stage 3)* by Ertan Ardanancı (2014): This book presents some Nasreddin Hodja stories in an abridged form (stage 3).

*Nasreddin Hodja Short Stories* by Derya Özyaydın (2008): This short book consists of a collection of some simplified Nasreddin Hodja stories for low-level English language learners.

*The Old Wit (Nasreddin Hodja)* by Ertan Ardanancı (2015): This short book introduces some simplified Nasreddin Hodja stories for low-level English language learners.

*The Philosopher's Philosopher Nasreddin Hodja* by Nebi Özdemir (2011): This invaluable handbook offers a quite detailed account of Nasreddin Hodja's life and provides an extensive coverage of Hodja's stories.

*The Selected Tales of Nasreddin Hodja* by Tuna Erdoğdu (2014): This book offers some Nasreddin Hodja stories in English.

*Traditional Turkish Folktales for Children* by Ahmet Edip Uysal (1993): This book offers a collection of traditional Turkish folktales for children including some Nasreddin Hodja stories.

*Turkish Folktales for Children* by Barbara K. Walker (1989): This book consists of a collection of Turkish folktales for children including some Nasreddin Hodja stories.

### 3.2 Internet Resources

[<http://www.readliterature.com/hodjastories.htm>]: This website offers ninety different Nasreddin Hodja stories in English.

[<http://www.sivrihisar.net/stories.htm>]: This site presents some famous stories of Nasreddin Hodja in English.

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[<http://www.rodneyohebsion.com/mulla-nasrudin.htm>]: A number of Nasreddin Hodja stories can be accessed on this site.

[<http://www.nasruddin.org/index.html>]: This site covers information on the philosophical background about Nasreddin Hodja along with many of his stories.

[<http://u.cs.biu.ac.il/~schiff/Net/front.html>]: This site offers around a hundred Hodja stories with enriching visuals.

[[http://www.otoons.com/joke&game/mulla\\_nasrudin.htm#sthash.futMndTp.dpbs](http://www.otoons.com/joke&game/mulla_nasrudin.htm#sthash.futMndTp.dpbs)]: This site offers two hundred Hodja stories.

[<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/hodja.html>]: This site covers twenty-five popular Hodja stories.

[<http://e-citadel.com/HodjaFiles/>]: This site offers a number of Hodja stories with supporting visuals.

The above lists of printed and online resources for Nasreddin Hodja stories constitute only a part of the existing body of works that offer Hodja stories. Even so, one can get access to a number of Nasreddin Hodja stories in English through these resources. However, it should be noted that while selecting stories to be covered in the classroom the content of the story should be meticulously analysed in terms of appropriacy for educational settings.

#### **4. A Suggested Lesson based on a Nasreddin Hodja Story in Turkish EFL Context**

The following reading exercise has been developed by the researcher based on the well-known story entitled 'Cauldron'. The English version of the story was taken from the website [<http://www.readliterature.com/hodjastories.htm>] that offers stories compiled by Eskicioğlu (2001).

#### **Sample Lesson**

##### **Before Reading:**

- 1- Have a look at the following picture and try to guess which Nasreddin Hodja story does it illustrate?
- 2- Do you have a cauldron at home? If yes, for what purposes do you use it?
- 3- Have you ever heard that a cauldron gives birth?



(<http://www.mizahsen.com/kazan-dogurdu-fikrasi.html>)

### **-Cauldron-**

Nasreddin Hodja had borrowed a cauldron from his **neighbour**. When he didn't **return** it for a long time, the neighbour came knocking on the door.

'Hodja Effendi, if you are finished with the cauldron could I take it back? The wife needs it today.'

'Ah, of course,' Hodja said, 'just wait here a minute and I'll **fetch** it.'

When Hodja came back to the door with the cauldron, the neighbour **noticed** that there was a small pot in it.

'What is this?'

'Well, neighbour, congratulations, your cauldron **gave birth to** a baby pot.' said the Hodja.

The neighbour, incredulous, yet delighted, thanked the Hodja, took his cauldron and the new little pot, and went home.

A few weeks after this incident, one day The Hodja came again, asking to **borrow** the cauldron. The neighbour didn't even **hesitate** and lent Hodja the cauldron with **pleasure**. However, once more it was taking the Hodja forever to return it back. The neighbour had no choice but to go asking for it again.

'Hodja Effendi, are you done with the cauldron?'

'Ahh neighbour, ahh' bemoaned The Hodja, 'I am afraid your cauldron is dead.'

'Hodja Effendi, that's not possible, a cauldron cannot die!' exclaimed the disbelieving neighbour. But Nasreddin Hodja had his answer ready.

'My dear fellow, you can believe that it can give birth, why can't you believe that it can also die?'

## Vocabulary Check

Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the following words.

neighbour (n) / return (v) / fetch (v) / notice (v) / give birth to (v) / borrow (v) / hesitate (v) pleasure (n)

1. Nasreddin Hodja has dialogue with his ..... in some stories.
2. Can I ..... your pen for an hour.
3. Our cow ..... a lovely calf yesterday.
4. It is really hard to ..... these tiny details.
5. It is a great ..... for us to welcome you in our city.
6. He answered the question directly, without .....
7. Can you ..... the keys from the cupboard?
8. It is important to ..... the borrowed items on time.

## Comprehension Check

### A. Answer the following questions.

1. Why did the neighbour come to the Hodja?
2. Why did Nasreddin Hodja bring a small pot with the cauldron?
3. Why was the neighbour very happy when the Hodja brought the cauldron?
4. Why did the neighbour come to the Hodja for the second time?
5. What was the Hodja's response to the neighbour when he wanted the cauldron?
6. What is the humorous piece of information in the story?
7. What is the didactic message hidden in the story?

### B. Tick the following statements as True (T) or False (F).

1. The neighbour borrowed a cauldron from the Hodja. T-F
2. Hodja gave his neighbour a small pot with the cauldron. T-F
3. The neighbour believed that the cauldron gave birth to a small pot. T-F
4. The cauldron died at Hodja's home. T-F
5. Hodja returned the cauldron to the neighbour twice. T-F

## Writing

1. Rewrite the story in your own words.
2. Assume that this were your story and write a different conclusion for it.

## Project

Have a look at the following visual and try to guess which Nasreddin Hodja story it illustrates. Then find the English version of the story and read the text. In groups prepare a drama performance based on the text.



(<http://www.aksehir.bel.tr/portal/index.php/nasreddin-hoca/nasreddin-hoca-hakkinda>)

## 5. Conclusion

It is apparent that Nasreddin Hodja is a universal figure and holds a quite special position in Turkish culture. Taking the literary, cultural, and humorous aspects of Nasreddin Hodja stories into account, their English versions may turn out to be valuable texts to be used in EFL classrooms. Especially 'Nasreddin Hodja' figure's close association with Akşehir and Turkish culture can enable learners to feel a warm familiarity while studying English on the stories. This plus is expected to raise their motivation and lower anxiety remarkably. In addition, when this cultural familiarity is supported by the humorous elements covered in the stories, Nasreddin Hodja stories become much more noteworthy within the context of language teaching and learning.

Nasreddin Hodja stories can be used as effective tools to enhance different language skills. If they are covered as written texts (e.g. in coursebooks), reading skill can be directly addressed and as a part of reading subskills like vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation can receive contribution. Speaking activities can be done through visual prompts or oral discussion can be launched before or while reading the stories. Furthermore, if the covered story is dialogue- or triologue-based, drama activities can be organized in the classroom. Various storytelling activities can also be done. Lastly, writing exercises can be done through rewriting the stories or concluding the covered story in a different and original way.

While writing curricula and syllabi for Turkish EFL learners at different levels, at least one or two Nasreddin Hodja stories should be covered during a semester. If the coursebook at hand does not cover any, the language teacher can bring Nasreddin Hodja stories into the class as an icebreaking step.

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