

**ADDRESSING FUTURE  
CHALLENGES IN EARLY  
LANGUAGE LEARNING AND  
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION**

**ISBN: 978-84-1122-802-2**

Beatriz Cortina-Pérez  
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Silvia Corral  
Natalia Martínez León  
Ana Otto  
(Editors)



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ISBN: 978-84-1122-802-2

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# TIRED OF SLEEPING BEAUTIES? AN ADAPTATION OF A GENDER-INCLUSIVE TALE FOR EFL PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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## Abstract

This work derives from a study in which we critically analysed a gender-inclusive children's tale for native speakers of English. In this paper, our main objective is to offer a pedagogical proposal for working on transformative, feminist and progressive tales in EFL at primary school level in order to counteract discrimination based on gender stereotypes, including queer people. Our tale adaptation not only considers gender issues, but it also pays attention to the language used for EFL pupils, aged 10-11, in a bilingual school (following the CLIL approach). This study is inspired by queer, transformative and responsible pedagogies, including Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), which foster critical thinking and creativity in our pupils. As a result, we offer specific and simple strategies for EFL teachers on how to adapt gender-inclusive traditional tales according to the pupils' level of English. Our proposal is a teaching unit based on four lesson plans. By working on diverse types of activities, primary school children will be further motivated to learn English and they will be encouraged to enjoy (fairy)tales in the FL, with the final aim to contribute to a more gender-inclusive and equitable society for all.

**Keywords:** Children's tales, CSMM, EFL primary education, gender, queer pedagogy, teaching unit.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Our justification is based on the fact that traditional fairy-tales are still told nowadays at primary schools in Spain. Some of these traditional tales tend to show a clear distinction between the role of men and women, where the former have almost all the power and the latter are passive characters, often waiting for the male hero to save them, as in the case of *Sleeping Beauty*. Thus, to counteract gender discrimination of all types, we consider it important to propose gender and queer-inclusive stories through a teaching unit divided into four lesson plans for pupils aged 10-11 with a A2/lower B1 level of English in their EFL classroom in a bilingual school, where the CLIL approach is implemented. These are the main objectives of our work:

- To discuss a gender-inclusive adaptation called *Sleeping Brainy* (from *Fairless Fairy Tales* by Huq & Kay, 2019)

- To propose our new progressive adaptation (*Happy Sleeping Brainy*)
- To assist primary school pupils to adapt other stories with their level of English
- To include issues regarding the role of men, women and queer people, as forms of social identities already identifiable by the pupils in their own life

## 2. THEORETICAL PREMISES AND PREVIOUS STUDIES

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Our study is inspired by queer theory (e.g., for ESL see Nelson, 2009), which problematises the role of heteronormativity in education and considers all different types of gender identities (LGBTIQ+), as well as equity among all people, including women, different ethnicities, and different social classes. This is a perspective that perfectly matches our work. Critical and transformative pedagogies (e.g., Bedford, 2009) aim at transforming our education into a more progressive and equitable one for everybody. We intend to value each of our students' viewpoints while we try to make them conscious of the position from which they express themselves, giving them the possibility of creating 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988). By doing so, we will develop a 'responsible' pedagogy that shows caring for one another. At the same time, we will encourage our students to critically approach traditional children's tales, reconsidering not only the roles of women, but also those of men. For this, we will also take into account Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM), in which we can define the term 'hegemonic masculinity' (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in contraposition with a more hybrid or inclusive masculinity, such as 'affective' or 'inclusive'.

As for previous studies, we will analyse and compare those that are similar to ours. For example, María. A. Barreras (2010) utilises tales in order to teach vocabulary and grammar in EFL primary education; whilst Elena Ortells (2020) criticises children's books by canonical authors in the EFL classrooms. Moreover, Stef Barozzi (2016) underlines the importance of training in gender and sexual identities both for primary and secondary school teachers, including EFL education at primary school. Finally, as demonstrated in one of our studies (López-Rodríguez et al., 2022), we analyse how children's tales in English can be adapted for EFL primary pupils. We consider all these works relevant for our own pedagogical proposal.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

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We will analyse some traditional tales that are still currently used at primary school level in Spain in English, concentrating on *Sleeping Beauty*. We will include the discussion we used for *Sleeping Brainy* (López-Rodríguez et al., 2022) aiming at writing a different and even more progressive version: *Happy Sleeping Brainy* (Annex 1). The methods applied for our proposed teaching unit are: Task Based Learning (TBL) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

## 4. PEDAGOGICAL PROPOSAL

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We have organised a teaching unit, called "Are you tired of sleeping beauties?", into four lesson plans of two hours each. For 10/11-year-old primary school EFL pupils in a bilingual school, with A2/lower B1 level of English.

Lesson plan 1: <i>What's wrong with traditional tales?</i>	
	Description of activities and tasks
Pre-task	<p><b>Activity: Brainstorming about traditional tales</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> The teacher will set up mixed-ability groups according to their level of English so that students can help each other during the whole teaching unit. In these collaborative groups, students will try to answer the question “What’s wrong with traditional tales?”. First, pupils will answer in small groups. Then, the whole class will share their ideas, while the teacher or a student with a higher English level writes the ideas on the board.</p>
Task-cycle	<p><b>Activity: Class discussion</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> A group and class discussion will be carried out about the role of female and male characters in the tale <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> and in the other tales mentioned by the pupils. The term ‘gender equity’ will be explained and discussed.</p>
Post-task	<p><b>Activity: Class discussion about traditional tales</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> The teacher will prompt students to answer these questions orally: “Do you think <i>Sleeping Beauty</i>, or another tale, can be improved in terms of gender equity?”. “If so, how?” After discussing these questions, in groups students will try to reflect their ideas by making a more gender-equitable illustration for a future re-writing of <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> or any other of the tales they will have chosen.</p>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illustrations taken from traditional tales</li> <li>• Story <i>Sleeping Beauty</i></li> <li>• Creative materials for drawing and colouring</li> </ul>

Lesson plan 2: <i>What's new about this tale?</i>	
	Description of activities and tasks
Pre-task	<p><b>Activity: Vocabulary presentation</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> Before this class, the teacher will have selected the words and/or phrases that students may find difficult to understand from the new story they will work during this lesson, which is called <i>Sleeping Brainy</i>. In this first activity the teacher will try to elicit from their students definitions and/or examples for the new vocabulary. The teacher will provide further examples and will show pictures, whenever helpful, to make the vocabulary clearer.</p>
Task-cycle	<p><b>Activity: Simplifying the story</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> With the help of their teacher, the children will simplify the story with their own English to understand the gist of the tale.</p>
Post-task	<p><b>Activity: Class discussion</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> The teacher will listen to the children’s opinions and take them into consideration when transforming and adapting a new tale. To do so, the teacher will ask the following questions: “How has the tale <i>Sleeping Brainy</i> improved in terms of gender equity?”. “What would you have done differently to improve it even more?”.</p>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Images to illustrate the vocabulary</li> <li>• Presentation with examples</li> <li>• Story <i>Sleeping Brainy</i></li> </ul>

Lesson plan 3: <i>Happy Sleeping Brainy</i>	
Description of activities and tasks	
Pre-task	<p><b>Activity: Presentation of <i>Happy Sleeping Brainy</i></b>  <b>Description:</b> The teachers will introduce the new revisited version of <i>Sleeping Brainy</i>, called <i>Happy Sleeping Brainy</i>. The text will be distributed containing a glossary with the explanation of the most difficult words. All the text will be in English adapted to the pupils' level (Annex 1).</p>
Task-cycle	<p><b>Activity: Storytelling</b>  <b>Description:</b> The teacher will tell the story in a dramatised way while showing the illustrations. Then, the children will take turns to tell the story or act it out speaking in English and looking at the illustrations from the book with some keywords in English.</p>
Post-task	<p><b>Activity: Class discussion</b>  <b>Description:</b> The pupils will have to recognise the most important changes in the story and critically discuss them, first in groups, then with the whole class.</p>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Story <i>Happy Sleeping Brainy</i> with glossary (Annex 1)</li> <li>• Illustrations from the story</li> <li>• Props and/or costumes to act out the story</li> </ul>

Lesson plan 4: <i>Your turn now, adapt a new story</i>	
Description of activities and tasks	
Pre-task	<p><b>Activity: Reinventing fairy-tales</b>  <b>Description:</b> Children reinvent a new fairy-tale of their choice in small groups with the teacher's supervision.</p>
Task-cycle	<p><b>Activity: Presenting the new tale</b>  <b>Description:</b> In small groups children will tell their new story or act it out, including gender and queer themes, in front of the class in turns.</p>
Post-task	<p><b>Activity: Writing and describing their new tale</b>  <b>Description:</b> As a final activity for this teaching unit, pupils will have to write in their portfolio their new adapted story in groups. Afterwards in class, students will describe their story in groups; emphasising what they have learned and why they consider these issues important to be discussed and treated at primary school level.</p>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various traditional tales/New adapted versions</li> <li>• Props and/or costumes to act out the selected stories</li> </ul>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

These activities can foster class debates and critical thinking as pupils will transform and adapt new traditional tales by changing the gender roles and by giving girls and women, including queer people, a more important part in their stories. Nonetheless, in our research we have encountered these three particular limitations:

- How to adapt the stories to the pupils' real level of English.
- How to adequately treat issues related to gender identities.

- How to motivate pupils aged 10-11 to work on fairy-tales/children's stories since they might not be interested in them anymore.

However, the pupils are certainly interested in gender themes and motivated to address them in class. In fact, our new adapted version has included issues that are not normally contemplated in primary school in Spain through a simplified level of English. Furthermore, pupils aged 10-11 will be able to use (and thus improve) their own English to express what they feel about the new progressive story, including those that they will have invented themselves. They will also learn how to critically discuss and problematise traditional fairy-tales, debating the role of men and women and the lack of other gender identities (LGBTQI+ people).

We think that this type of teaching proposal can easily work at primary school with pupils aged 10-11 even with an A2 or lower B1 level of English, which can be helpful for all EFL teachers who want to discuss gender-related issues with their pupils.

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## ANNEX 1: OUR NEW ADAPTED STORY

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### Happy Sleeping Brainy

Once upon a time, there was a royal family who lived in a democratic country, like now Spain or Buthan, in Asia. In this family there was a king and his daughter, Oona, a princess. Oona was a very brainy<sup>1</sup> girl. She could count to seventeen million and do her forty-eight times table forward (and even backwards!). Oona knew Einstein's theory<sup>2</sup> and she was working on a better one. Oona was a genius!

Oona was *not* the typical princess. She did not like wearing crowns or preparing dresses, she found these activities very boring: "I'm sure I don't want to be a princess when I grow up, being a princess is absolutely rubbish. When I grow up, I'm going to help people with what they need, not only money, but also happiness". Oona already had better ideas than their Minister of Economy, who was always getting their<sup>3</sup> sums wrong.

So, the country's economy was terrible! Oona always told her father, the king, that the minister's sums were wrong but her father never listened to her. He kept telling her: "Being Minister of Economy is an impossible job for a girl, and you are a princess! A princess cannot work with the government, unless you renounce to be a princess, and, anyway, girls cannot solve maths problems. Come on, Oona. Go and buy a new beautiful dress for you and then you can appear on *Vanity Fairy*<sup>4</sup> *Tale* magazine!". Oona was very sad (and she thought): "My father believes that girls cannot be good at maths, or at other things considered to be only for men".

One day, while the king was busy, Oona went secretly into his counting room and counted all his money. She spent all day doing sums to know how much money they needed to save to help all the people of their country, but when she was about to finish the calculations, the king entered the room. The king was very angry with Oona and said: "Enough is enough! I will hire you a royal tutor! You are going to learn all the things that princesses do, like waving<sup>5</sup> your hand and smiling, and sewing<sup>6</sup>, and receiving flowers, and walking elegantly on glass shoes. *Not* doing difficult calculations!". "But that's not fair!", exclaimed Oona. "And together with the Prime Minister I'm prohibiting everybody to count in the entire country! So, from now on nobody will be permitted to count anymore", said the king. "If someone counts, they will spend three hundred years in prison!".

In order to trick her father, Oona was planning to be always asleep to go secretly to the counting room to do her sums. Some days later, while she was doing her calculations, Oona received some terrible news: nobody in the entire country could sleep. The people stayed in bed but they couldn't sleep. The people closed their eyes but they couldn't sleep. Everybody in the country was walking around in their pyjamas in the middle of the night. They were very tired!

The king too was so tired that he didn't have the energy to find an answer to the problem. But Oona was a genius! So, in exactly thirty seconds she said to the king: "Daddy, I know the

<sup>1</sup> 'Brainy' comes from 'brain' and it means intelligent.

<sup>2</sup> Einstein was a genius in maths and his theory was about space and time.

<sup>3</sup> You can use 'they' and 'their' when you don't know the gender of a person.

<sup>4</sup> Vanity Fair is a very important fashion magazine. In this tale the word 'Fair' was changed to 'Fairy', like in 'fairy-tales'.

<sup>5</sup> Moving your hand when you are saluting.

<sup>6</sup> Making clothes.



answer!”. The sleepy king replied: “Don’t be ridiculous, Oona! A little girl can’t know the answer to anything! I will solve this problem!”. A day passed. And another. And another. A hundred days passed and still nobody in the entire country could sleep.

Oona was exhausted too. She was even more tired than when somebody put a pea<sup>7</sup> under her mattress and she couldn’t sleep all night. She was even more tired than when she woke up in the middle of the night because she was having nightmares<sup>8</sup>. She dreamed that she kissed her pet frog Ribbit and he became a prince! “Yucky! I’m not interested in kissing a prince!”. But, most of all, she was tired because the king never listened to her. Things in the country were a total disaster! The minister of economy was making mistakes all days and nights! So, the country had very little money and nobody could sleep!

The king tried to solve the sleeping problem with male astronomers and scientists, but they were all very bad. So, the king called a famous male clown to tell a joke, who said: “What do you call a Spanish boy with a rubber toe<sup>9</sup>?”, and the clown exclaimed: “Roberto! Rubber toe! Roberto! Ha ha ha ha!”. Nobody laughed. They were too tired and sad, or it was a very bad joke.

The king was desperate and exhausted. So, in the end, he asked Oona for help. “Daddy, it’s really simple”, said Oona. “Nobody can’t count sheep in their beds to fall asleep, this is why everybody is so tired and you have forbidden counting, so, they cannot sleep anymore”. Oona was very excited and the king said: “Oh, that really was so simple, thank you Oona”.

Finally, Oona solved the problem. The king said that everybody could count again, so every person in the country went to sleep for a long time and everybody voted Oona as number one princess of all time by *Vanity Fairy Tale* magazine. Many princes from all over the world wanted to know her and to marry her, but she wasn’t interested in love relationships. She had a lot of things to study and she wanted to play with her frog Ribbit, too. Besides, she thought: “I’m not even sure if I like boys more than girls, I’m still young to think about love and marriage”<sup>10</sup>.

After apologising<sup>11</sup> to Oona, the king admitted that he was a bad king and a bad father, but he wanted to change. He said: “From now on you can use the counting room whenever you need to do your sums”. Then, together with the Prime Minister, he organised a big party for all the people of the country. But before going to the party, the people decided to have a *siesta*. After sleeping, they celebrated and they were much happier.

Some years later, when Oona was an adult, she decided not to be a princess anymore and she became a common person with the approval of her father. In fact, by doing so, she became the first woman as ‘Minister of Economy and Happiness’. She decided that economy was important, but happiness was even more important. She was so sad when she was not permitted to count, that she decided that everybody should have the same opportunities to be happy with what they like. So, she went from house to house to ask the people what they needed to be happy. Sometimes they didn’t need more money, but more hugs, kisses and holidays! So, poor people with little money received more money to live better, but especially more affection and toys for the children, so that all people in the country could enjoy the same rights, including people with different ethnicities, women, but also men who love men

<sup>7</sup> A small and green round vegetable. This is related to an old fairy tale where the princess had to sleep with a pea under her mattress.

<sup>8</sup> Very bad dreams.

<sup>9</sup> A toe is like a finger, but in your feet.

<sup>10</sup> When you decide to live by law with the person you love.

<sup>11</sup> Saying you are sorry.

and women who love women. Oona was very happy about these changes, because all the people in the country were happy too!

One day in her 'Ministry of Economy and Happiness' she proclaimed: "Now all primary school children, including girls and all types of genders, can study maths, science and all the subjects they enjoy. They can also learn how to be happier and to listen to each other". Oona was voted the best Minister of Economy and Happiness of all times in the country.

Ah! Oona became famous also because she created her own personal website called 'Happypedia', where the people in her country could find and request multiple ways to be happy. Finally, while putting her feet on the table, Oona said: "Well, I did all this work in fifteen thousand, six hundred and eighteen days! I'm really happy now!".