A STUDY OF STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS USING LOCAL FOLK STORIES FOR IMPROVING ENGLISH READING SKILLS AT KUNSHAN DEVELOPMENT ZONE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, JIANGSU PROVINCE, CHINA

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Abstract: This study determined the students' and teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China. This study has two research objectives: (1) identifying the students' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China. (2) to identify the teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China.

244 Grade 11 students and 10 English teachers participated in this study. The researcher used mixed explanatory methods to collect the data to carry out the research. The research instruments used were a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire for students and a structured interview for teachers. The findings indicated that (1) the Grade 11 students studied at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School have positive attitudes toward using local folk stories to improve English reading skills. Since the total mean score of students' perceptions on using local folk stories for improving English reading skills was interpreted as high on the interpretation scale. (2) the teachers who taught Grade 11 at the target school believed the application of folk stories in English reading teaching was helpful for students to improve their reading skills, and they were prone to use folk stories in their future teaching English classes.

Keywords: Folk Stories; Students' Perceptions; Teachers' Perceptions; English Reading

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Introduction
A class requires teachers' and students' participation; in that case, this research investigated Grade 11 students' and teachers' perceptions toward using local folk stories for English reading comprehension in senior high school in Kunshn, China. Students' Perceptions refer to the participants' beliefs, thoughts, and behavior in this study (Vanderbilt University, n.d.). Teachers' perceptions mean their beliefs, views, attitudes, and teaching practices related closely to their response to meet their everyday professional life challenges. They shape students' learning environment and affect their motivation and achievement (OECD, 2009). Bathmaker and Lee (2007) also believed that teachers' theoretical beliefs and views would affect their teaching practice.

Reading is an essential but complex language skill combining multiple skills and processes (Yusuf, 2016). English reading is necessary for someone who wants to learn English well. Through reading, students can remember writing, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and other language aspects. Grade 11 students are experiencing a crucial stage during their life. They will attend the college entrance examination, which determines their destiny. English is a compulsory subject for the college entrance examination, and the examination content involves a lot of reading.

Using folk stories has been associated with enhancing literacy and language development. As students participate in folk stories learning, it can improve their reading comprehension ability (Bayly,2007). Folk stories in the EFL classroom can spark students' interest and aid in the development of reading comprehension, achieve cultural values, increase vocabulary using descriptive and fictional writing styles, etc...

Objectives
The objectives of this study are as follows:
1. To identify students' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China.
2. To identify teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China.

Review of Literature
Reading Comprehension
Reading is a fundamental skill critical to the success of most (if not all) academic studies and higher education. Therefore, reading comprehension is

a thinking process for readers to select facts, information, or ideas from printed materials. Determine the meaning that the author intends to convey; determine their relationship with prior knowledge, and judge its suitability and value to meet the learner's own needs and goals (Marimuthu, Michael, Muthusamy, and Veeravagu, 2010).

The problem emerges when the students do not have any background knowledge of what they are reading, and this problem is faced by most students in China now (Heryanto& Rahmawati, 2018). As Duke and Pearson (2017) said, if students want to understand unfamiliar reading materials, they need to compare and connect them to their existing knowledge.

Transactional Theory
The Transactional Theory authored by Rosenblatt (1994) captures the reading ability and the relationship that is formed between the words of the written text and the student. In this way, the student's past experiences or prior knowledge plays an essential role in developing reading comprehension. Prior knowledge is critical to the correct analysis of a reading passage because its interpretation depends heavily on this former experience and knowledge.

Duke and Pearson (2002) noted that learners must have sufficient experience to comprehend a passage. While this is critical, the reality is that many high school students and young learners are not fully grown to understand a wide variety of life issues. As a result, students' do not have sufficient prior knowledge to grasp either the meaning of the passage or its context. On the other hand, folk stories provide one avenue to bridge the gap between reality and fantasy, thus creating a fictional experience for the students to immerse themselves, which would allow them to both imagine a situation and gain some relevant knowledge from it as well.

Nature of Folk Stories
Ruth (1984) thought that a folk story is "The prose narrative genre" of oral literature, while Bascom (1965) believed folk stories are prose narratives regarded as fiction. They are not considered dogma or history, they may or may not have occurred, and they should not be taken seriously. Folk stories can be a story, myth, or legend, composing part of the oral tradition without a singular, identifiable author or writer, and have been passed down from one generation to the next. Folk stories can happen at any time, anywhere; that is to say, they are almost eternal and can be seen everywhere. In addition, folk stories, especially the common types of stories in legends, follow conventions, the stereotyped beginnings and endings ("Formerly or long ago..." "...From then on, they lived happily ever after.), with simple and flat characters and

chapters (Gioia and Kennedy, 2007). Folk stories obscure the hard lessons of life to provide the audience or readers with guidance on their behavior. In this way, folk tales transmit values and beliefs, traditions and cultures from generation to generation. A folk tale can be reshaped by modification and often changes whenever it is retold.

Benefits of Folk Stories in English Language Teaching
A recent study by Mangalik and Upa (2018) recognized the psychological importance of students' perceptions regarding student motivation. They found that folk stories are likely to improve interest and concentration towards a specific reading activity and improve both the learning process and enhance classroom conversation surrounding the chosen folk stories.

Other benefits include the use of literature in second language learning, for instance, the moral and cultural assertions identified within a text and the creative work to enlighten a learners' imagination. Studies have also found the potential to provide authentic material that the world's cultures have valued through rich language and syntactic patterns (Sayeef, 2019). For high school students, folk stories can introduce a young learner to life's challenges and identify ways to deal with some of life's most difficult topics, for instance, jealousy, hatred, death, as well as love. For this reason, folk stories provide a valuable source for high school students to talk, write, read, and discuss deeply contentious issues that are commonly not discussed.

Applications of Folk Stories in English Language Teaching
Research by Nhung (2016) found that "literature-based language teaching has been considered a common approach to promote both oral (listening and speaking) and literacy (reading and writing) skills. It involves using literary works of different types and scopes, ranging from prose and poems to folk chants and folk stories to engage learners with meaningful, authentic input" (p. 24). Increased learning using literature-based language teaching also helps develop students' participation in group activities, which is likely to increase due to greater conversational involvement over a given folk story.

Although this holistic application to language teaching provides an approach that is meaningful in the four skills of language competency, folk stories also engage the student in valuable life skills in an imaginative manner. This creative and imaginative approach promotes better learning and increases interaction (Manjula& Segni, 2016). At the same time, this might develop the communicative and 21st-century skills of the L2 learner. It also promotes a greater understanding of foreign cultures through folk stories; how distinct cultural contexts could entice students to become more interested in foreign

cultures. Thus, folk stories act as a means to improve bi-cultural or multi-cultural understanding in China (foreigners in China) or develop better understanding and insight into other nations.

Manjula & Segni (2016) also found that folk stories effectively improve classroom interaction, develop student engagement with their peers and teachers, and enhance student motivation toward various English skills. While the benefits of student interaction are evident, folk stories can improve learning in more enjoyable and engaging ways since many young L2 learners do not willingly choose to study a foreign language out of their own free will. They are often pushed by family factors: a desire for the family to live abroad or a want on the part of the parents to improve the chances of their child to have a better future. In this sense, folk stories offer these children a more accessible and more subtle way to learn than simply using textbooks and grammar. For this purpose, folk stories might motivate learners to learn a language more naturally and in line with children who are native English speakers.

Studies by Nhung (2016) have shown that this stress-free approach to learning folk stories for language instruction allows all four language skills to be used and supports an ongoing conversation about the folk stories themselves and what it means to each person in the group or classroom. This application, as a result, increases intellectual competency since L2 learners begin to focus more on the meaning of the context rather than the form of the context (Nhung, 2016).

Further research by McKay (2000) has shown that through folk stories utilization, familiar content might enhance students learning, thus allowing for greater engagement, participation, and improved use of vocabulary and sentence structures to be actively used in the classroom. For this purpose, familiarity within the application of the folk stories supports a more meaningful context for the L2 learner to develop their competency skills, thus allowing for a life lesson to be understood.

Conceptual Framework
The researcher conducted this study from students' perceptions and teachers' perspectives at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China.
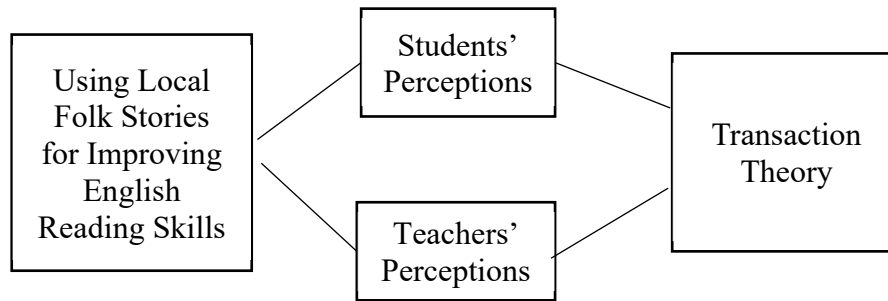
Figure 1. *The Conceptual Framework for this Study*

Methodology
This study utilized a mixed-method approach to research, which is designed using both quantitative (questionnaires using the 5-point Likert scale) for research objective one as well as qualitative (structured interviews) for the research objective at the selected public school in Kunshan district of Jiangsu Province, China during the academic year of 2019-2020.

Sample
According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the population of grade 11 students at the selected public school is approximately 576 during the academic year of 2019-2020; thus, the sample size for this research is 244 students. The total number of English teachers is 10, the sample size for this research is ten teachers.

Research Instrument
The research instruments are in the form of a questionnaire using the 5-point Likert scale and a structured interview. Siddique used the selected questionnaire (2009) and Ismail & Masnur (2017) for research by ten high schools in Rawalpindi and SMA Muhammadiyah Kalosi - Enrekang Senior High school. The researcher mixed these two questionnaires and conducted them at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School. Ning proved the interview questions at the University of Toledo in 2011. Thus the research instrument has an appropriate level of reliability for graduate research.

Findings
Presented below are the findings of the research objective 1 to 2.
Findings from Research Objective One

Table 1. *Interpretation of Mean and Standard Deviation for Students' perceptions*

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Folk stories help me to learn pronunciation.	3.45	1.07	Moderate
2. Folk stories help me to read a text fluently.	3.41	1.18	Moderate
3. Folk stories help me to learn new vocabulary.	3.51	.97	High
4. Folk stories help me to unlock the meaning of a new word.	3.48	1.04	Moderate
5. Folk stories help me to comprehend a text easily.	3.57	1.01	High
6. Folk stories help me to identify the meaning of common idioms.	3.54	1.09	High
7. Folk stories help in boosting scanning and skimming strategies of reading.	3.48	1.16	Moderate
8. Folk stories make learning enjoyable.	3.47	1.10	Moderate
9. Folk stories provide meaningful and real input.	3.41	1.10	Moderate
10. Folk stories provide opportunities for achieving new reading materials.	3.46	1.10	Moderate
11. Folk stories deliver a good source of cultural information.	3.43	1.10	Moderate
12. Folk stories increase my cognitive skills.	3.46	1.04	Moderate
13. Folk stories strengthen my word recognition skills.	3.47	1.19	Moderate
14. Folk stories engage me in the reading activity.	3.60	.99	High
15. Folk stories develop my stronger reading skills.	3.55	1.06	High
16. Folk stories offer variety in learning English reading.	3.53	1.12	High
17. Folk stories make me aware of the	3.55	1.11	High

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
necessity of reading materials.			
18. Folk stories should be an integral part of the curriculum.	3.42	1.10	Moderate
Total	3.50	1.08	High

Table 1 illustrates that the overall mean score for students' perceptions of the questionnaires showed a total mean of 3.50. According to the interpretation criteria, this would be interpreted that 244 students' perceptions of using local folk stories for improving English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School were, overall, high. This indicated that the Grade 11 students' class at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School has positive attitudes toward using local folk stories to improve English reading skills.

Of the eighteen questions, *Folk stories engaged me in reading activity* achieved the highest score (3.60). However, the lowest score acquired was illustrated by *Folk stories help me to read a text fluently,* and *Folk stories provide meaningful and real input* (3.41).

Findings from Research Objective Two
This objective identified the teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China. The responses of all ten respondents match the same question and are shown in Appendix E. The researcher read the material repeatedly, choosing useful information to summarize the similarities and differences. The findings indicated that these different domains influence teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories in the classroom.

• **Reinforce Students' Cultural Awareness**

Examples from the interview:

T2: "Folk stories are the *stories from people's lives which people tell for many years or a long time*. I would use folk stories in teaching English reading in my future classes since I think folk stories *involve Chinese cultures, which have effects on students' cultural identity*."

T6: "I think folk stories are t*he stories or legends passed on generation by generation orally. It's a part of the culture of a nation.* Folk stories would exist in our books as examples to *help us learn specific knowledge*."

These examples from the interview showed that most teachers believed that folk stories are helpful to reinforce students' cultural awareness because folk stories originated from people's lives and spread for a generation. They thought that folk stories are interesting and can attract students' interest and gain more knowledge, especially about the traditional culture.

• **Attract Interest and Motivation**

Examples from the interview:

T1: "Students still are interested in the folk story; *it can improve students' learning motivation*."

T4: "Teaching folk stories *is a good way to develop students' interest in English reading.*

T5: "I think folk stories should be taught in grade 11 students' English reading course because folk stories *can make students feel that reading is very interesting and not boring. Full of interest in learning*."

These examples from the interview showed that folk stories are interesting and motivating for students because the various types of folk stories can make reading enjoyable, thus avoiding boredom.

• **Useful Contents**

Examples from the interview:

T4: "When I was teaching, because *some folk stories are not easy to understand,* I will speak Chinese if necessary."

T6: "In my class, I always use role-play to let them *understand the characters* and the story better in a real situation. Some stories have significance in educating kids, some ethics, and so on. The students are interested in *short stories, vivid and interesting, and the language is easy to understand*."

T10: "I view folktales as *good content* to exercise students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills."

These examples from the interview indicated that teachers thought that folk stories were helpful content for their students. Folk stories are vivid with regard to the use of language. However, some students still expressed their understanding difficulty.

• Develop Students' Reading ability

Examples from the interview:
T2: "For reading skills, I think that *folk stories are helpful to develop students' ability*."

T5: "I believe that *folk stories can help students improve their reading ability* because the plot of the story will be *attractive* to them."

T6: "I usually teach folk stores by means of videos and pictures to *deepen students' understanding*."

T7: "Yes, I believe that *students can improve reading skills by reading folk stories*...Because stories can *attract students' interests*, improve English skills, and help them understand the traditional culture, students in grade 11 have an *efficient English level to understand the folk stories*. And the folk stories *can improve students' English skills.*"

These examples from the interview records implied that teachers considered using folk stories in English teaching as this helps their students to improve their reading skills. Additionally, folk stories can help students handle new words, improve the ability to understand the critical points of a story, learn how to summarize, paraphrase, and understand in context.

Discussion
This section discusses the findings of this research by linking them to the findings of previous research studies. It also analyzes this study from the perceptions of students and teachers.

• **Students' perceptions on using local folk stories for improving English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China**

One objective of this research is that the selected 244 students who studied at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China, were required to describe their opinions on using local folk stories for improving English reading skills through eighteen questions. *Mean and*

Standard Deviation were used to determine the students' perceptions of folk story utilization within the educational classroom.

The total mean score for students' perceptions of using local folk stories to improve English reading skills was ***high*** on the interpretation scale.

Bayly (2007) indicated that using folk stories has been associated with enhancing literacy and language development. As students participate in folk stories learning, it can improve their reading comprehension. In the findings of the questionnaire, the mean score of question Folk stories engages me in the reading activity. Folk stories help me comprehend a text easily. Folk stories developed my stronger reading skills, all of which could be interpreted as high. These findings approved the viewpoint that folk stories help improve students' comprehension ability.

Folk stories' mean score helped me learn new vocabulary, and Folk stories helped me *identify the meaning of common idioms* that were respective *high* on the 5-point Likert Scale. This understanding might mean that the students' perceptions of using local folk stories to increase their vocabulary are effective. As Onyi (2017) found, the utilization of folk stories throughout the EFL instructional program helps develop learners' vocabulary threshold. Min (2008) also agreed that vocabulary enrichment activities are an important segment of the EFL curriculum and that folk stories can assist second language learners in improving their vocabulary threshold.

- **Teachers' perceptions on using local folk stories for improving English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China**

In objective two of this research, the ten teachers who taught Grade 11 at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China, were demanded to display their viewpoints on using local folk stories to improve English reading skills through ten questions. Content analysis was used to identify the teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories in English reading teaching.

Four domains influence teachers' perceptions of using local folk stories for improving English reading skills at Kunshan Development Zone Senior High School, Jiangsu Province, China. They are: reinforce students' cultural awareness, attract interest and motivation, provide helpful content, develop students' reading ability.

These experiences were supported by Oli (2016) that when using folktales to develop students' reading skills, the teachers should pay attention to determining the goals of language teaching according to the needs and expectations of students, choosing appropriate language reading materials, teaching techniques, and goals related to folktale language teaching. When selecting the types of folk tales for use in English classes, it is necessary to consider students' background, language level, hobbies, and interest in reading materials.

All of the ten interviewed teachers considered it helpful and valuable to utilize folk stories in teaching English to improve their reading skills. They would use folk stories in their future English teaching classes. As Segni and Davidson (2016) mentioned, folk stories effectively improve classroom interaction, develop student engagement with their peers and teachers, and enhance student motivation towards various English skills. Recent studies by Onyi (2017) also found that students' self-confidence is likely to increase when using folk stories in the EFL classroom.

Recommendations
Bigger sample size could be used to ensure reliability and validity. And the research could be conducted in different grades and different areas.

The questionnaire the interview questions should be more comprehensive to some extent to get more objective data.

Conclusion
Using folktales in an ELT classroom is not a new concept. Many teachers have found these folk stories to be useful for language learning. This study identified the perceptions of selected Grade 11 students and teachers toward utilizing folk stories to increase reading skills. As the researcher, I believed that the students and teachers who participated in this study that the folk stories are likely to help improve students' reading skills. They still need to understand well what integrating folk stories in teaching and learning English reading.

Similarly, teachers need to understand, arrange and design folk stories carefully in advance according to the current cognitive level of students, teaching activities, and teaching objectives, which can promote the smooth running of the whole reading class to some extent. In the meantime, they should also develop their abilities to make adjustments based on the actual progress of the entire English reading class.

Last but not least, folk stories are only there to guide and support teachers to assist their teaching in the ELT reading classroom. A deeper understanding of the application of folk stories is an essential method to help teachers improve students' English reading comprehension abilities.

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