

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH PROPP'S FAIRY-TALE MORPHOLOGY: PRACTICAL DIRECTIONS FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract. This article examines how Vladimir Propp's theory of fairy-tale morphology can support language and narrative development in preschool and the early years of elementary school. By transforming recurring narrative functions and character roles into age-appropriate visual cards, children are encouraged to understand, retell, organize, and create stories. This approach develops vocabulary, oral fluency, grammatical accuracy, coherence, imagination, and critical thinking. Practical activities include collaborative storytelling, role-playing, sequencing, matching exercises, and creating original stories. The article also presents implementation principles and a teacher training program, demonstrating that educators gain confidence in designing inclusive, interactive, and linguistically rich learning experiences.

Keywords: fairy tale morphology, language development, narrative competence, visual cards, storytelling, creativity, teacher training.

DEZVOLTAREA COMPETENȚELOR LINGVISTICE ȘI NARATIVE PRIN VALORIFICAREA „MORFOLOGIEI BASMULUI” A LUI VLADIMIR PROPP: REPERE PRACTICE PENTRU CADRELE DIDACTICE

Rezumat. Acest articol analizează modul în care teoria morfologiei basmelor a lui Vladimir Propp poate sprijini dezvoltarea limbajului și a narațiunii în perioada preșcolară și în primii ani de școală primară. Prin transformarea funcțiilor narative recurente și a rolurilor personajelor în cartonașe vizuale adaptate vârstei, copiii sunt încurajați să înțeleagă, să repovestească, să organizeze și să creeze povești. Această abordare dezvoltă vocabularul, fluenta orală, acuratețea gramaticală, coerența, imaginația și gândirea critică. Activitățile practice includ povestirea în colaborare, jocul de rol, ordonarea secvențelor, exerciții de potrivire și crearea de povești originale. Articolul prezintă, de asemenea, principii de implementare și un program de formare a cadrelor didactice, demonstrând că educatorii capătă încredere în conceperea unor experiențe de învățare incluzive, interactive și bogate din punct de vedere lingvistic.

Cuvinte-cheie: morfologia basmului, dezvoltarea limbajului, competență narativă, carduri vizuale, povestire, creativitate, formarea cadrelor didactice.

1. Early language education: interaction, play, and storytelling

Language develops most effectively in environments where children have real reasons to communicate. In preschool, this means more than just providing isolated vocabulary or pronunciation exercises. Children need a variety of situations in which they can ask questions, describe experiences, negotiate roles in play, listen to others, and express their desires, emotions, and opinions. Communication with adults and peers gradually transforms language from a means of signaling immediate needs into a tool for organizing thoughts, remembering events, and understanding the world. Therefore, the educator,

together with the family and other significant adults, plays a central role in creating linguistically rich experiences that strengthen attentive listening, comprehension, clear expression, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary.

The foundations of language emerge in a child's first sounds and continue to develop through social interaction and symbolic play. As part of this process, children acquire increasingly complex phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic patterns. In pretend-play situations, an object can represent something else, a child can speak as if in the role of a character, and a sequence of actions can become a short story. Such experiences link language to imagination and help children use words not only to name visible objects but also to represent absent events, intentions, causes, and consequences [3].

Conversation, poetry, memorization, educational games, picture book reading, and storytelling all contribute to this development. Through dialogue, children expand their responses and discover how questions can open new avenues of exploration. Poetry and literary language introduce rhythm, expressive phrases, and cultural references. Image-based activities encourage observation and interpretation, while fantasy stories invite children to explore unusual characters and impossible situations without losing the logical thread of events. In this way, language education also contributes to the formation of cultural identity and to the development of a child's ability to understand perspectives different from their own [4, 5, 8].

Stories are particularly valuable because they combine knowledge, emotion, sound, and linguistic modeling. A story can familiarize children with the sounds of the natural environment such as bear's growl, the buzzing of bees, the sound of rain, the rhythm of hooves, or the rustling of leaves—while also providing a model of coherent and stylistically appropriate speech. Through repeated listening, children discover new words, idiomatic expressions, traditional phrases, and artistic figures of speech. The educator's voice, pauses, facial expressions, gestures, and ability to maintain a calm yet engaging atmosphere influence the quality of the experience. Storytelling becomes educationally productive when children are not merely passive listeners but are invited to anticipate, explain, retell, and transform what they have heard.

Children's own stories are just as important. Learning to put their thoughts, desires, and feelings into words supports both language development and personal autonomy. From an early age, children should be encouraged to recount what happened, describe how a character might feel, explain why an event took place, and imagine what might happen next. Such tasks reveal how well they can select relevant details, maintain a sequence, and adapt their language to an audience. They also create a natural bridge between oral language and subsequent written expression [2, 7].

Traditional methods of reading and storytelling remain essential, but they can be enriched through structural and visual tools. Vladimir Propp's "Morphology of the folktale" and the narrative books derived from it offer such an opportunity. Story maps make the structure of a story visible. They help children observe that character's act for specific reasons, that events are interconnected, and that a problem usually leads to a sequence of trials, obstacles, forms of assistance, and solutions. For the teacher, this model provides a flexible framework for activities that combine language practice with play, cooperation, and creativity.

2. Propp's morphology as a framework for understanding stories

Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist, revolutionized the study of fairy tales by focusing on their structure rather than primarily on their themes or symbols. In his work "Morphology of the Folktale", first published in 1928, he compared many folktales and observed that very different plots are often based on a limited set of recurring actions. Characters, settings, and magical objects may change, but the narrative structure determined by certain events remains similar. A warning may be disregarded, an antagonist may cause harm, a hero may leave home, a helper may provide an extraordinary object, and a difficult task may ultimately be accomplished. Propp called these recurring actions "functions" [1, 6, 9].

The model is based on three ideas that are particularly useful in education. First, fairy tales exhibit a structural regularity that is recognizable across cultural and historical differences. Propp identified thirty-one functions that tend to appear in a stable order, although a specific fairy tale may omit some of them, repeat others, or combine them. Second, characters can be understood in terms of their sphere of action. The best-known roles are the hero, the antagonist, the benefactor, the helper, the one who assigns the mission, the sought-after person or reward, and the associated authority figure, as well as the false hero. Third, the plot of the fairy tale is structured around disruption and its resolution. A relatively stable beginning is disrupted by a loss, a prohibition, a deception, or a harmful act; the hero accepts a mission, faces trials and encounters helpers, confronts opposition, and ultimately restores order.

For young students, this complex theoretical description can be broken down into a few key stages. A typical pedagogical version might begin with the initial situation, continue with the emergence of a problem, follow the hero's decision to act, introduce obstacles and help, and conclude with the confrontation, return, recognition, or reward. This simplified sequence provides children with a roadmap without imposing every detail on them. It supports coherence while leaving room for unexpected characters, humorous solutions, alternative endings, and personal interpretations.

The value of this approach does not lie in asking children to memorize technical terminology. Its educational power stems from the fact that it helps them perceive the relationships between events. When children understand that a warning foreshadows a subsequent transgression, that help is linked to a previous attempt, or that recognition depends on a sign introduced earlier, they begin to reason about narrative causality. They also become more attentive listeners and more mindful storytellers.

3. Turning narrative functions into flashcards for the classroom

Narrative flashcards transform an abstract structural model into a concrete and playful tool. Each flashcard can contain an illustration, a symbol, or a combination of these elements. In this way, the cards create a shared visual vocabulary that supports both comprehension and production.

The cards are useful because they provide enough structure to prevent a story from turning into a list of unrelated ideas, while still giving children the freedom to choose characters, settings, motivations, dialogues, and solutions. They also distribute participation more equitably. A child who finds it difficult to invent an entire story can contribute to an event inspired by a card, while a child who is more verbally fluent can develop that same event. The activity becomes accessible to different levels of language proficiency and encourages children to listen to one another so that their contributions blend harmoniously.

Collaborative storytelling

To create the story collectively, the teacher prepares cards representing a selection of narrative elements, such as the emergence of a problem, the hero's departure, a trial, magical help, the confrontation, and the return. The children work in a circle or in small groups. One child draws a card and proposes a sentence or a short episode; the next child continues based on the new card, while also building on what has already been said. The teacher can record the story, repeat key sentences, or ask the group to clarify any unclear connections. This activity practices chronological sequencing, grammatical connections, active listening, taking turns speaking, vocabulary, and narrative coherence.

Recognizing and reconstructing familiar stories

Well-known stories, such as "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Cinderella," can be reconstructed using cards arranged in random order. Children identify the narrative moment represented by each card and arrange the sequence. Then, they retell the story, justify their decisions, and compare alternative arrangements. The exercise strengthens memory and comprehension but goes beyond simple reproduction, as children must explain the relationship between events. A more advanced version asks them to remove a card and discuss how the story would change.

Role-playing guided by narrative functions

Narrative functions can become roles or dramatic prompts. One child might be assigned “the hero asks for help,” another “the magical helper sets a challenge,” and another “the villain tries to trick the hero.” Children improvise actions and dialogues that express their role. The activity can be carried out with costumes, puppets, masks, or simply with gestures and voice. Role-playing develops oral fluency, expressiveness, the ability to adopt others’ perspectives, and the skill of adapting speech to a character and a situation. It also makes the story’s structure visible through action.

Associating events, characters, and scenes

In association games, children link a role card to an image, a description, or a character. A scene in which a fairy offers an object can be associated with “magical help,” while a wolf in disguise can be linked to deception. The teacher can ask why a particular association is appropriate and whether another interpretation is possible. These discussions develop conceptual thinking and help children distinguish between who a character is and what that character is doing at a given moment.

Creating an original fairy tale

To invent a new fairy tale, each child or group draws several cards and uses them in the given order. A sequence such as “something is missing,” “the hero receives unusual help,” and “a final battle takes place” can lead to many different plots. The children decide what is missing, why it is important, who helps, what the danger is, and how the conflict ends. The structure acts as a creative constraint: it narrows the task enough to make invention possible but does not dictate the content. In this way, imagination and logical organization develop together.

Vocabulary and language-focused exercises

Books also provide opportunities for explicit language activities. The teacher can introduce words related to characters, actions, emotions, time, and causality. Technical terms such as “prohibition,” “donor,” “antagonist,” or “recognition” can be discussed with older students, while younger children can use accessible equivalents, such as “rule,” “magical helper,” “bad character,” and “finding out who the real hero is.” Children can create sentences with the new words, find synonyms, change verbs from the present to the past tense, add adjectives to describe characters, or use conjunctions such as “because” “therefore,” “suddenly,” “meanwhile,” and “finally.” These activities link literary comprehension with practical language development.

4. Principles for effective use with preschoolers and young students

The educational impact of Propp-inspired books depends less on the number of functions used than on how the teacher adapts and facilitates the activity. The following

principles help maintain a balance between structure, play, and the children's developmental needs:

- ✓ *Understand the model before simplifying it:* Teachers should understand the complete sequence of functions and the recurring roles of the characters, even when using only five or six cards with the children. This understanding allows them to select meaningful steps and respond flexibly when children alter the plot.
- ✓ *Use language that is accessible to children:* Concepts must be translated into expressions that children can understand. "The villain causes a problem" is more accessible than "the antagonist commits a bad deed," and "someone provides the hero with magical help" is clearer than "the donor provides a magical agent." Familiar examples make the meaning concrete.
- ✓ *Adapt the complexity to the developmental level:* Preschoolers benefit from large illustrations, short sequences, repetition, gestures, and opportunities to manipulate the books. Early elementary school children can work with longer sequences, compare versions, justify choices, and analyze causes, motivations, and consequences.
- ✓ *Prepare materials carefully:* Books should be visually clear, durable, and easy to organize. Color-coding can distinguish general categories, such as the problem, the journey, help, the conflict, and the ending. Familiar stories, scene pictures, puppets, and simple recording sheets can support the activity without distracting from the language.
- ✓ *Create an interactive and cooperative atmosphere:* The teacher should invite all children to contribute, encourage them to build on previous ideas, and prevent a fluent speaker from dominating the group. Collaborative tasks are most productive when each contribution has a visible place in the shared story.
- ✓ *Use books flexibly:* Not every session requires the same activities or a complete sequence. Children can replace a book, invent a new one, add characters, or propose an alternative ending. Books are suggestions, not rules that limit the imagination.
- ✓ *Prioritize expression over correcting errors:* During creative storytelling, children need psychological safety and enough time to formulate their ideas. The educator can provide examples of correct forms, rephrase unclear sentences, and revisit linguistic aspects after the story, rather than interrupting every attempt. Open-ended questions, such as "What might happen next?" or "How might the hero solve this problem?", stimulate thinking and speaking.
- ✓ *Connect the storytelling activity to other areas:* Stories can be extended through drawing, collage, modeling, movement, music, sound effects, puppet theater, live theater, and digital storytelling. These extensions allow children with different strengths to demonstrate their understanding and enrich the same narrative through various forms of expression.

Within these principles, the teacher's role is that of a mediator. The educator provides guidance, clarifies relationships, asks for explanations, and helps the group maintain coherence, but does not take ownership of the story. A successful activity gives children the sense that the narrative belongs to them, even if its development was supported by carefully chosen pedagogical tools.

5. A teacher training program on the use of narrative cards inspired by Propp

Since the cards appear simple, there is a risk that they will be used merely as decorative images or as a mechanical sorting game. Training should therefore combine theoretical understanding with practical design, facilitation, and evaluation. The following program, structured in eight parts, is intended for educators working with preschool and early elementary school children:

1. *Introduction to Propp's theory*: Objective: to familiarize participants with the basic ideas of the work "Morphology of the folktale." Content: the recurring sequence of narrative functions, the main spheres of action, and how a folktale evolves from an initial situation, through disruptions and trials, to the restoration of order. Special attention is given to functions that are easily recognizable by young children, including the emergence of a problem, the hero's mission, the encounter with a villain, and the receipt of magical help. *Methods*: short presentations, analysis of well-known fairy tales, and guided discussions.
2. *Adapting the theory for young students*: Objective: to transform a complex theoretical model into language and tasks appropriate to the children's developmental level. Content: selecting five to seven basic functions, replacing technical terms with everyday expressions, and choosing examples from fairy tales the children are already familiar with. *Methods*: hands-on exercises in which educators identify the functions in a story and rewrite them as simple instructions for different age groups.
3. *Designing and using narrative cards*: Objective: to enable teachers to create clear, engaging, and functional materials. Content: combining illustrations with concise text, using symbols and color categories, preparing sets for group activities, and demonstrating how the cards can support storytelling, role-playing, reenactment, and association. *Methods*: hands-on workshops in which participants design a set of cards and test them with colleagues.
4. *Techniques for developing language and narrative skills*: Objective: to practice facilitation strategies that encourage oral expression and coherent storytelling. Content: open-ended questions, vocabulary expansion, sentence modeling, the use of temporal and causal connectors, as well as methods to help children maintain a sequence. *Methods*: demonstrations and role-playing, in which participants alternate between the roles of child and educator.

5. *Collaborative games and activities*: Objective: to integrate narrative books into playful group experiences. Content: collaborative story creation, book matching, dramatic improvisation, alternative endings, and cooperative problem-solving. The activities are linked to daily planning so that they can be used in both short language-focused sessions and longer-term projects. *Methods*: simulation, peer facilitation, and reflective discussions.
6. *Observation, assessment, and adaptation*: Objective: to help teachers observe progress and respond to individual differences. Content: observing vocabulary use, sentence complexity, sequencing, participation, and the ability to explain relationships between events; adjusting the number of cards, visual aids, group size, or teacher guidance; and adapting tasks to make them more accessible or more challenging. *Methods*: case studies, observation rubrics, and analysis of classroom situations.
7. *Interdisciplinary integration*: Objective: to connect narrative learning with artistic, musical, dramatic, and digital expression. Content: Sketching scenes, crafting character masks, creating songs or soundscapes, staging puppet theater, and producing digital stories. *Methods*: Hands-on workshops in which participants design a short interdisciplinary script based on a sequence of activities.
8. *Summary and questions*: Objective: to consolidate key ideas and support their application in practice. Content: review of theoretical and methodological principles, presentation of participants' work, clarification of difficulties, and exchange of feedback. *Methods*: open discussion, peer evaluation, and individual planning for classroom application.

Resources required for training

- *Sample card sets* illustrated and text-based versions presenting different levels of complexity.
- *Visual aids*: slides explaining the model through familiar examples and clear diagrams.
- *Game materials*: fairy tale images, puppets, masks, props, and scene cards for simulations.
- *Assessment tools*: observation sheets and simple criteria for monitoring language and narrative development.
- *Ready-to-use lesson plans*: activity scenarios and adaptable templates that help teachers integrate the method into their daily practice.

6. Educational benefits and training outcomes

The use of narrative books can simultaneously influence multiple areas of learning. Children gain a clearer understanding of how stories are structured, expand their

vocabulary, and practice oral expression in meaningful contexts. The need to connect one event to other fosters logical and critical thinking, while the open-ended content of the books encourages imagination. Group storytelling also creates opportunities for cooperation, negotiation, active listening, and acceptance of different ideas. Because the activities resemble games, children tend to participate with greater interest and less fear of making mistakes.

The training program described above aimed to strengthen teachers' ability to achieve these benefits deliberately, rather than by chance. The main results can be summarized as follows:

✓ *A more solid understanding of Propp's model:* Teachers became able to recognize the recurring structure of fairy tales and explain the role of certain functions. This understanding facilitated the selection of appropriate books and guided children toward a deeper awareness of narrative organization.

✓ *A greater ability to adapt functions to age and language level:* Participants learned to reduce the number of functions, simplify terminology, and vary visual or verbal support. As a result, the same general method could be used with both preschoolers and children in the early grades without imposing identical expectations.

✓ *More creative use of books in daily educational activities:* Teachers developed practical ways to use books for group storytelling, games, role-playing, reenactments, and original creation. Activities became more participatory, and children had more opportunities to contribute ideas and cooperate.

✓ *More robust strategies for fostering language and narrative skills:* Open-ended questions, sentence expansion, vocabulary exercises, and guided sequencing were used more purposefully. Children were encouraged to formulate clearer ideas, make connections between episodes, and tell stories with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end.

✓ *Improved collaboration and creativity within groups:* Teachers became more confident in facilitating shared storytelling and cooperative problem-solving. Children learned to listen to their peers, to accept or adapt another child's contribution, and to negotiate how a shared plot should continue.

✓ *Flexible use in various educational contexts:* Participants adapted the card-based activities to different group profiles and integrated them with visual arts, movement, theater, music, and digital media. This interdisciplinary approach supported visual, kinesthetic, musical, and verbal forms of learning and made the method more inclusive.

✓ *Continuous assessment and adjustment:* Teachers practiced observing changes in oral expression, vocabulary, participation, and narrative construction. These observations helped them modify prompts, group organization, and task difficulty based on the children's progress.

✓ *Integration with broader educational goals:* Narrative activities were no longer treated as isolated language exercises. They became opportunities for emotional expression, artistic creation, social learning, and intellectual exploration, allowing children to retell the same story through multiple means of communication.

These results show that the method is not limited to teaching the content of fairy tales. Its broader contribution lies in supporting teachers in designing structured yet open-ended learning situations. The cards make narrative relationships visible, while the educator's questions and feedback transform these relationships into opportunities for language use. Children are supported in the transition from isolated words and events to connected, intentional, and expressive discourse.

Conclusions

Propp's Morphology of the folktale offers educators a useful way to look beyond the surface of a story. By identifying recurring actions and roles, it provides a framework that can be transformed into simple visual cues and used in numerous forms of language activity. The method does not replace literary texts, expressive storytelling, free play, or conversation. On the contrary, it connects them, offering children a visual map of how events can be organized.

When the worksheets are age-appropriate, explained in accessible language, and used flexibly, they support comprehension, vocabulary, oral fluency, chronological sequencing, grammatical organization, and creative thinking. Activities based on reconstruction, association, improvisation, and original storytelling also foster cooperation and trust. Their interdisciplinary potential allows a story to be continued through drawing, music, theater, movement, or digital production, offering children different meaningful entry points to the same learning experience.

Teacher training remains essential. Educators must understand the model, select relevant functions, design clear materials, ask productive questions, observe children's responses, and adjust the level of support. Training in these areas boosts teachers' confidence and encourages more invention, inclusive, and reflective practice. Used in this way, narrative books inspired by Propp can help create an educational environment in which children learn language by doing what language is naturally meant to do: sharing experiences, creating meaning, imagining possibilities, and constructing stories together.

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