

## Introducing mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales to Sri Lankan German language learners. (A case study)

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the pitfalls of introducing mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales to Sri Lankan German language learners. The research is conducted as a case study where both the teacher's and learners' experience during the classroom sessions are analyzed to identify which teaching materials can be used to introduce Grimm's mythical creatures to Sri Lankan German language learners. The research sample consisted of learners who follow the German first-year special degree program at the department of modern languages, University of Kelaniya. Three classroom sessions were observed using different teaching materials to analyze how the learning process should be gradually developed. The learners' experience of learning Grimm's mythical characters was examined through the distribution of a questionnaire. According to the findings of the research, it was evident that the Sri Lankan learners' perception of mythical creatures is influenced by the Sri Lankan folktales, which contain a wide variety of mythical characters from Indian mythology. Therefore, it was encountered by the researcher that the learners' previous knowledge about mythical beings is an obstacle for the learning process. Yet the data collected from the classroom observations and questionnaires has indicated that it is possible through carefully selected visual materials such as images, documentaries, and written manuscripts of legends and myths to introduce the Grimm's mythical fairy tale characters to Sri Lankan German language learners more effectively.

**Keywords:** *German language learners, Grimm's fairy tales, introduce, mythical creatures, Sri Lankan*

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## Introduction

The Grimm's famous fairy tale collection of "Children's and household stories" by Brother Grimm, first published in 1812 with 82 fairy tales, has laid the foundations for many research disciplines related to German literature. During the fairy tale collection period in 1785, Germany was divided into several states and was going through the Napoleonic wars, which prevented Germany from being united as a country. The civilians were afraid of losing their national and cultural heritage due to the changing of borders and foreign influences.

According to Brother Grimm, the most natural and pure roots of any culture are hidden in folklore in its purest form, untainted by foreign influences. Therefore, they believed that acquiring a philological understanding of old German literature, which is handed over from one generation to the other by word of mouth and entails natural language, would motivate the people to identify the connection between customs, laws, and beliefs of their origins and unite them as one nation. Their effort in collecting and documenting folklore has saved the folktales from extinction and has bequeathed the preserved folklore as a common cultural identity to German people of all social classes.

German folklore shares many similarities with Scandinavian and English folklore, and all these three folklore traditions have their origins in German mythology. The folklore of Germanic tribes was rich in early Christian pantheon and magical characters depicted as supernatural spirits. Although belief in pre-Christian pagan rituals faded with Christianization, some supernatural spirits from early Germanic mythology, such as witches, elves, dwarfs, kobolds, nymphs, fairies, and water spirits, later became prominent figures in German folklore.

Grimm's fairy tale collection, which is highly influenced by the ideologies of dark romanticism and the early Germanic mythologies, contains high fantasy and supernatural elements. These elements are either derived from a magical person (from a witch or from a fairy god mother) a magical object (a magic mirror or a magic pot) or an enchantment (Snow white is awakened by a kiss). Moreover, the magical or mythical characters depicted in Grimm's tales are rather complex as they either appear as positive spirits who comfort and help the protagonist (fairies, mermaids, nymphs, fairy god mothers, and dwarfs) or as characters with dark negative spirits (witches, demons, Kobolds) who play the role of antagonists. Yet the human nature of the protagonist's character is clearly depicted through the interaction between the protagonist and the mythical creatures. Therefore, studying the nature of mythical beings is considered important when studying fairy tales as a literary genre as it allows the reader to closely examine the motif, setting, themes and the plot of the story.

Instructors in various academic disciplines, especially in Germanistik<sup>1</sup>, have identified Grimm's fairy tales as a pedagogical tool, which offers a broad range of

1 The study of German language and literature from its inception to the present day, in terms of its social and cultural relationships, as well as its theoretical underpinnings.

educational needs for learners to strengthen their writing and reading skills, explore cultural values and enhance critical thinking. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm have also named their fairy tale collection as an educational manual (Erziehungsbuch) which can be used in universities for folklore and medieval literature studies of early Germanic tribes.

Grimm's fairy tale collection is used as a study material for German special degree first year students at the department of modern languages, university of Kelaniya for the course unit 'Analysis and interpretation of German literature'. The objective of this course unit is to introduce learners to different folklore genres in Germany, such as fairy tales, legends, and fables. Learners are expected to identify the characteristics of each genre and analyze their narrative form, structure, characters, themes and plot. Furthermore, they conduct research, group projects, and presentations to be familiarized with the historical evidence of the origin of the stories, their oral traditions, and engage in exercises which enhance their intercultural skills about folklore genres in Germany and Sri Lanka.

Learners who are familiar with German fairy tales either through Disney films or through Sinhala and English translations, find it interesting to read the original versions of the stories written in German and are surprised to see the differences between the content of the stories they have already known and the original German version. Yet introducing mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales to Sri Lankan German language learners was a challenging experience for teachers, as the language learners had their own perceptions of mythical creatures due to the influence of Sri Lankan folktales.

The students' images of certain mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales were formed based on their knowledge of mythical creatures depicted in jataka tales<sup>2</sup> and in Sri Lankan folktales. Yet the mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales that originated from Germanic mythologies rarely share similarities with the mythical creatures in Sri Lankan folklore. Therefore, the objective of this research was to examine the pitfalls of introducing mythical creatures from Grimm's fairy tales to Sri Lankan German language learners. The research was conducted as a case study where both the teacher's and learners' experiences during the class room sessions are analyzed to identify which teaching materials can be suggested to introduce Grimm's mythical creatures to Sri Lankan German language learners more effectively.

## **Literature Review**

Grimm's fairy tales are alive with supernatural creatures such as fairies, dwarfs, witches, mermaids, nymphs, and sorcerers who were part of the pre-Christian imagination, which believed that another unseen world existed alongside our own. According to Rieti, witches in folklore are considered as ambiguous mythical creatures with complex characteristics who appear as monstrous evil spirits. But in some stories, we find witches being kind and loving and playing the role of a maternal benefactress to the protagonist.

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2 A voluminous body of literature native to India concerning the previous births of Gautama Buddha in both human and animal form.

Aside from that, witches are associated with healing powers, knowledge of medicinal herbs, and a close relationship with nature. Rieti, B. (2008)<sup>3</sup>

Sigrid Brauner explains in her book ‘Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany’, how Grimm’s fairy tale witch character was influenced by the witch trials in Germany. She states that witch hunts existed throughout Europe until 1750, and the last witch execution took place in Germany about fifty years before the first fairy tale collection was published in 1812.

Yet, the belief and fear of witches and supernatural powers were not easily erased after the executions were stopped but remained during the times when the Grimm brothers were writing their first manuscripts of the fairy tale collection. Moreover, she mentions that although the fairy tale witch character in Grimm’s fairy tales would seem like an imaginary character to modern-day readers, it was more closely considered real by readers who came from a generation that had experienced witch trials with their own eyes. Brauner, S. (2001)<sup>4</sup>

The nature of the mythical witch character in Grimm’s fairy tales is further studied by Meghan Hill in the research article ‘A Comparative Analysis of Character Depiction in the Grimm’s Kinder-und Hausmärchen and Modern Fairytale Adaptations’, where she has highlighted the complexity of Grimm’s witch character with examples from popular fairy tales. Meghan Hill has identified two types of witch characters in Grimm’s fairy tales, which she has categorized as witches who use excess use of magic powers and witches who practice magic in isolation. The witch in Rapunzel, who owns a lush garden and has raised her daughter for several years without revealing her secret, is considered by Meghan as a witch who uses her magic powers only in isolation, while the witches in Hansel and Gretel and Snow White seem to be witches who use excessive magic powers on a daily basis. Yet the fairy tales give evidence that both types of these witch characters need magic powers to fight or to defend themselves, and without the magic, they are helpless as normal human beings. Hill, M. (2015)<sup>5</sup>

Grimm’s fairy tales have inherited significant features from folktales, which have roots in mythological stories and consist of themes such as cannibalism and infanticide, which are portrayed mainly by the character of a witch or by mythical creatures such as dwarfs, kobolds, or werewolves. According to Maria Tatar, cannibalism and infanticide are included in Grimm’s fairy tales not because the children prefer them, but because the adults expected through that to pass their internal message to the next generation. Tatar, M (1992)<sup>6</sup>

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3 Rieti, B. (2008), *Making Witches: Newfoundland Traditions of Spells and Counterspells*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston

4 Brauner, S. (2001), *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of the Witch in Early Modern Germany*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst

5 Hill, M. (2015), *A Comparative Analysis of Character Depiction in the Grimm’s Kinder-und Hausmärchen and Modern Fairytale Adaptations*, Honors Theses, Union College, Schenectady, New York

6 Tatar, M. (1992), *Off with Their Heads: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*, Princeton University Press, Princeton

Hansel and Gretel is one of the most well-known Grimm's fairy tale with cannibalistic elements. In this story, the cannibalism theme is represented through the character of an old witch who lives in isolation in the deep forest and wishes to kill the little children and eat their flesh. "a wicked witch" who "lay in wait for children and had built her little house of bread to tempt them, and whenever one of them got into her power, she killed it, cooked it, and ate it, and that was for her a day to celebrate" Zipes, J. (1987)<sup>7</sup>

In the fairy tale snow white, the antagonist's role is played by a queen who is also a witch who fears that snow white will become more beautiful than her. She orders a huntsman to kill Snow White and bring her heart and liver as proof. But not knowing that the huntsman had brought the heart and lungs of a wild pig, the queen orders the cook to cook them for her. "Boil them in salt, and the wicked woman ate them and thought she had eaten Snow White's lungs and liver." Zipes, J. (1987)<sup>8</sup>

In Grimm's fairy tales, the witches are not always portrayed as black magic practitioners but also as white magic practitioners or as healers who help the protagonist on their journey. According to Federici, wise women knew much about nature, berries, plants, and how to help people with their pains. One can say that a wise woman was a kind of healer, which was a typical characteristic of good witches. Federici, S. (2012)<sup>9</sup> In German literature, white witches are referred to as "Weise Frauen" (wise women). In the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, the king arranges a celebration and invites thirteen 'Weise Frauen' to bless the new born child. Yet it is said that the thirteenth wise woman, who was angry at not being served a plate, cursed the child. "The king's daughter shall in her fifteenth year be wounded by a spindle, and fall down dead. Kemptner, D. (2009)<sup>10</sup>"

Then the twelfth, who had not yet given her gift, came forward and said "the king's daughter should not die, but fall asleep for a hundred years". Grimm, J., Grimm, W. (2011)<sup>11</sup> In the fairy tale of the Seven Brothers, the brothers are turned into seven crows after picking seven white lilies growing in the backyard. Then an old woman suddenly appears and tells the princess that she should not have allowed her brothers to pick the white lilies helps the princess what she should do to save her seven brothers from the curse. Therefore, it is evident that witches in Grimm's fairy tales are identified as magical supernatural creatures who can execute both black and white magic.

Similar to the character of witches, one of the other most prominent mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales are dwarfs. According to Reynold, dwarfs in Grimm's fairy tales are depicted as friendly, helpful mythical creatures who are safe to accompany. It is suggested through their hospitality in the Snow White fairy tale, where the seven

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7 Zipes, J. (1987), *The Complete Fairy Tales of The Brothers Grimm*, Bantam Books, New York

8 Zipes, J. (1987), *The Complete Fairy Tales of The Brothers Grimm*, Bantam Books, New York

9 Federici, S. (2012), *Witch-Hunting, Past and Present, and the Fear of the Power of Women*, Hate Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern

10 Kemptner, D. (2009), *Sleeping Beauty and her many relatives*, "Thesis, Georgia State University, Atlanta

11 Grimm, J., Grimm, W., (2011), *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Kindle Edition, Amazon Publishing.

dwarfs provide Snow White with a safe environment to protect her from her evil stepmother. (Reynolds, 2017)<sup>12</sup> furthermore they are presented as mine workers who excavate precious natural stones and rare rocks during the day. Yet in the fairy tale ‘Rumpelstilzchen’ (Rumpelstiltskin), another mythical creature who is similar to a dwarf or a kobold in appearance plays the role of the antagonist. Meghan Hill has analyzed the characteristics of the dwarf figure in the Rumpelstilzchen fairy tale, where she states that Rumpelstilzchen seems to be a non-human antagonist who possesses supernatural powers, because he helps the miller’s daughter to turn hay into gold, yet takes full advantage of the situation for his own benefit, finally making her promise to give him her firstborn child.

Although the fairy tale did not clearly explain why the dwarf needed the new born infant, it is mentioned that he sings in the evening sitting in front of his hut saying “”Heute back ich, Morgen brau ich”, which means “today I am baking and tomorrow I am brewing”, which means his intention is to kill the infant. Hill, M. (2015)<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the depiction of the dwarfs as mythical creatures is not similar in all Grimm’s fairy tales, where in some they are presented as trustworthy, friendly, and protective creatures, whereas in others they are shown as cruel, inhuman, and not trustworthy supernatural beings.

Another important supernatural appearance in Grimm’s fairy tales is the fairy god mothers who play the role of well-wishers and protectors of neglected children. The mythical character of the fairy godmother, who is a very frequent mythical figure in Grimm’s fairy tales, appears when the protagonist is in need of help or in danger. She is presented in the form of a fairy or an old woman who watches over the spiritual development and well-being of the child. In Cinderella, a fairy god mother appears and helps Cinderella to grant her wishes. Yet it is questionable whether the character of the fairy god mother is a form of a supernatural being or whether the character resembles the role of a human god mother. Because in most fairy tales, the fairy Godmother appears in front of orphans who lack motherly affection and are being ill-treated by society. In oral tradition, in certain European regions, grandmothers are often known as godmothers, and even uncles and aunts of the child will be known as godparents. Francisco, S. (2000)<sup>14</sup> Therefore, perhaps the supernatural figure of the fairy god mother in Grimm’s fairy tales symbolizes the motherly affection, warmth, and care that an orphan misses during his or her childhood.

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- 12 Reynolds, S. (2017). Grimm Fairy Tales & Their Successors: A Study on Snow White. [online]. Available at: <https://medium.com/@renwald12/grimm-fairy-tales-their-successors-a-study-on-snow-white-4e11fb7d3c77/> (Accessed 22 June 2021)
- 13 Hill, M. (2015), A Comparative Analysis of Character Depiction in the Grimm’s Kinder-und Hausmärchen and Modern Fairytale Adaptations, Honors Theses, Union College, Schenectady, New York
- 14 Francisco, S. (2000) “Complex Entities in the Universe of Fairy Tales.” *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 219–243. JSTOR. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/41388560](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388560)./ (Accessed 24 June 2021)

Mother Holle in the ‘Frau Holle’ fairy tale, is another well-known mythical figure in German folklore. The old woman named Mother Holle in Grimm’s fairy tales is a kind old lady with big teeth who lives in a house in the sky and helps the clever, hard-working girls by presenting gifts and good fortune, and on the other hand, punishes the lazy, stubborn girls. According to the fairy tale, she shakes her pillow in the morning to release white feathers which fall as snowflakes to the earth. Therefore, her character is presented as a fairy or as a white spirit who is in charge of the elements of nature. The origin of the mythical figure ‘Frau Holle’ lies in Germanic and Scandinavian mythology, where she is considered as a supernatural spirit similar to a witch who enters homes during Christmas and checks to see that all the household work and spinning is done. If the ladies of the house are lazy and not hardworking, she will punish them. But if the house is clean and tidy, she will be impressed and gift the young women of the house with spindles<sup>15</sup>. Gray, H. (2021)<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the above mentioned mythical creatures, Grimm’s fairy tales consist of nymphs, kobolds, and many other supernatural beings belonging to Germanic and Scandinavian mythology. When analyzing these mythical creatures, it is noted that each of these mythical characters has complex personalities, and even certain mythical creatures, such as dwarfs and witches, play both black and white roles in different fairy tales. Therefore, studying mythical creatures in Grimm’s fairy tales is a challenging task for Sri Lankan learners with limited knowledge of mythical figures in European mythology. Although there was research being conducted about the attributes of mythical creatures in Grimm’s fairy tales, less research was being carried out to identify how these mythical creatures should be introduced to language learners from a different cultural setting. Therefore, it is expected that this research will add new insights and novel knowledge to the foreign language literature and folklore research discipline.

### **Data Collection**

The research sample consisted of 15 students who were following the German first-year Special Degree program at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya. Three class room observations were conducted, each consisting of two hours of observation to observe how the learners try to identify the mythical characters in Grimm’s with what they are already familiar with. At the end of the final observation, a questionnaire was distributed to analyze the learners’ experience. This is a local case study research where the researcher was motivated to conduct the research after encountering that the learners’ previous knowledge about Sri Lankan mythical creatures is an obstacle when being introduced to mythical creatures in Grimm’s fairy tales.

The main focus of the data collection was given to the researcher’s observation during class room sessions in order to identify which teaching materials are more effective

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15 A slender, rounded rod with tapered ends is used in hand spinning to twist and wind thread from a mass of wool or flax held on a distaff.

16 Gray, H. (2021). *Frau Holle, the Germanic Winter Goddess* | *Hag Stone Journal*. [online] Available at: <https://hagstonejournal.com/frau-holle-the-germanic-winter-goddess/> (Accessed 23 June 2021)

when introducing Grimm's mythical characters to Sri Lankan learners.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected through class observations is analyzed to examine through which teaching exercises and materials learners' pre knowledge of mythical creatures can be tested. Class room observations were conducted in three sessions, with each session containing a different set of teaching materials and exercises. The first class room session was conducted with the use of images, and the second class room session was conducted using a worksheet with a reading text and guided questions, and the third class room session was conducted for evaluation, where the learners presented their research findings through a poster presentation.

### **Class room session 01**

During the first class room session, the learners were divided into four groups, each consisting of five learners, and each group was given five black and white images of mythical figures selected from the Grimm's fairy tales to describe. The groups were numbered from 1 to 5, and the images should be described in three steps. First, the learners should describe the appearance of the person whom they see in the image using adjectives, and then, as the second step, they should write down what reminds them of this image and whether they have seen this person before, and as the third step, they should guess the name of this mythical creature and what magical powers it possesses. The learners were not told that these images represent mythical creatures because some of the images are similar to humans in appearance. The expected learning outcome of this exercise was to test the learners' ability to identify mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales by using their previous knowledge of Sri Lankan myths and memories based on children's stories. The five images consisted of an image of a witch, a dwarf, a fairy god mother, a nymph and an elf. The five sets of images which were used for exercise 01 are given below.





Figure 01: The images in the worksheet (a witch, a dwarf, a fairy god mother, a nymph and an elf)

The first image, which is an image of a witch, was described by each group using adjectives such as wicked, old, cruel, ugly, evil, unsympathetic, cunning, and cruel. In every group, the learners have identified the character as a witch. To the question of what reminds them of this character and where they have seen this figure before, groups 1, 2, and 4 have written that this character reminds them of 'bata kola achchi'<sup>17</sup> in Sri Lankan fairy tales. The group 3 and 5 have written that this reminds them of the evil witch in Disney fairy tale movies. Almost every group has stated that they have seen this character in films, fairy tale books, and have heard of it during folk tale narrations by their parents and grandparents during their childhood. Through the adjectives the learners have used to describe the character of the witch, the researcher observed that the learners identify the character of the witch as an old evil woman, and they were first introduced to this character by their parents and grandparents, and later through Disney fairy tale films.

The image of the dwarf was described by each group using words such as funny, small, relaxed, friendly, helpful, protective, imaginary and intelligent. The researcher could not observe much difference between the descriptions provided by each group for this picture description. They all have mentioned that this image brings back their memories of the fairy tale snow white and have mentioned that they have seen this creature in animated fairy tale films and in children's story books. The learners' description has provided the researcher information to identify that they are familiar with the concept of dwarfs, because it is a common mythical creature found in both European and in Asian fairy tales. Yet their description has indicated that they identify dwarfs as extremely friendly, helpful and loyal creatures and are not aware of the fact that dwarfs in Grimm's fairy tale convey a mixed personality of good and evil.

<sup>17</sup> Sri Lankan fairy tale witch character

The learners have used vocabulary such as old, kind, loving, mother like, helpful, magical and fairy like to describe the image of the fairy godmother. They have written that this image reminds them of the fairy tale Cinderella. Because of the fairy wings and magic wand in her hand, they have guessed that she is similar to a fairy. And all the groups have mentioned that they have previously seen a similar image in Disney animated movies. Yet the students were unable to provide a proper explanation about who this person actually is.

Group 1 and 3 have written that this person could be an old fairy and group 2 and 4 have written that this character is a female sorcerer and the group number 5 has just written the word ‘grandma’ as an answer. Through the learners’ efforts to guess who this character is, the researcher realized that although they have seen this character before, this is not a familiar mythical figure for them, because this mythical character is rarely seen in Sri Lankan folktales. Therefore, the concept of fairy god mother seems to be an unfamiliar term for the Sri Lankan German language learners.

The adjectives used to describe the image of the nymph<sup>18</sup> by groups 1 and 3 include “beautiful,” “enchanted,” “magical,” and “unreal.” To the question of what memories they associate with this image, each group had different answers. Group 1 has written that this image reminds them of a fairy. Group two has written that it looks like a deity, and group number three has written that it is a princess. Group number four has written that it could be a young lady from a rich family, and group number five has written that it could be a ghost. Two groups (groups 3 and 5) have not answered the question of where they have seen this kind of image earlier, but group number 1 has stated that this image is similar to the maidens in the Sigiriya frescoes.

Group number 2 has written that these are similar to the paintings of deities in Buddhist temples and group number 4 has written that this mythical character reminds them of ‘kinduro and Kinduriyo’<sup>19</sup> in ‘sanda kinduru jathakaya’<sup>20</sup>. The description of the learners and their effort to identify similarities between nymphs and Sri Lankan deities was a signal to indicate that although they did not fully understand the concept of nymphs, they were able to guess the character attributes by comparing them with mythical creatures in Buddhist jataka tales.

In contrast to the reaction of the learners when identifying the character of the nymph, it was noted the image of the elf<sup>21</sup> which has a similar appearance to humans, has somewhat misled the learners. Because of the long cloak he wears and his noble personality, the learners have assumed he is a warrior lord or a prince. But his pointed ears gave them a hint that he could not be a human being. The learners have written that they have seen similar characters in films, and they especially mentioned the film ‘Lord of the Rings’. But they mentioned that they exactly don’t know what this mythical creature is.

### **Class Room session 02**

During this session, the learners were given a worksheet with a reading text on medieval witches and witch trials in Germany along with a set of guided questions

to be answered during the reading. This exercise was conducted as pair work. As it was mentioned in the literature review, the witch character in Grimm's fairy tales is a complex character who was influenced by the beliefs of the people during the witch trails in Germany. For example, studying the historical context would allow learners to understand how the fairy witch character was created based on real historical evidence. It was expected of the learners through this exercise, to be familiarized with the beliefs of the medieval superstitious, related to witches and to possess a thorough knowledge of the reasons for the witch trials in Germany. The answers were discussed in the class and the learners' opinion about providing a reading text with historical evidence about medieval witch hunts was analyzed through the distribution of a questionnaire at the end of the third class room session.

### **Class Room session 03**

As for the third exercise, the learners were again divided into 5 groups, and each group was given a mythical character which they had described during the first activity. The learners were instructed to do research on the origins of these mythical creatures based on German folklore and mythology, and analyze their character evaluation in Grimm's fairy tales. The findings of their research were presented in groups to the class as an oral presentation, and this exercise was used to evaluate their knowledge and understanding of the mythical characters in Grimm's fairy tales. The learners have used web sites and journal articles as primary sources for their research and as secondary resources they have retrieved information from documentaries.

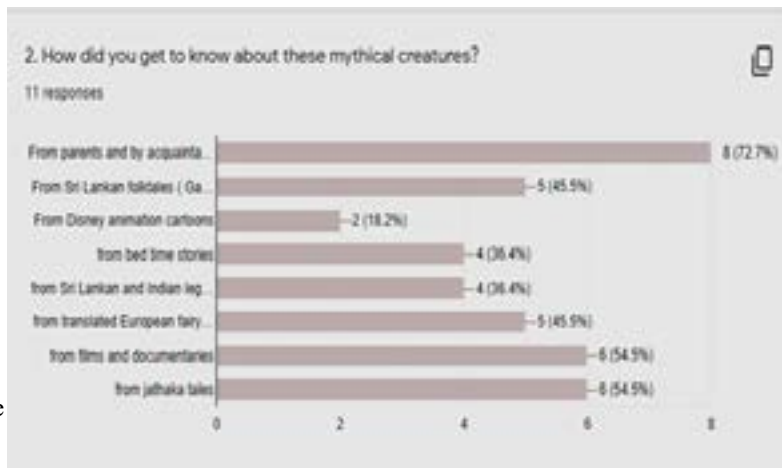
The learners' have analyzed the origins of the mythical creatures from written sources on Germanic mythology and have identified that the attributes of the mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales and in mythology are completely different from the depiction of mythical creatures in fairy tale films and in Disney cartoons. Therefore, they have avoided using films and animated cartoons for this research, as they have realized, that the contents of these products can be misleading and cannot be used as a trustworthy source of information, when analyzing Grimm's mythical creatures.

This opinion was solely based on the research findings of the learners and noted by the researcher, as one of the most interesting and surprising encounters of the class room observations where the learners have identified themselves, through which sources they can best learn about the mythical creatures of Grimm's fairy tales.

### **Data collected from questionnaires.**

After the end of the class room sessions, the learners were distributed a questionnaire to analyze their learning experiences during the three exercises. As for the first question, the learners were asked how they got to know about mythical creatures. To this question, 72% of the participants have answered that they were introduced to these characters by their parents during their childhood through children's stories. 54% have stated that they were familiarized with mythical creatures through films and documentaries and through

Buddhist jataka tales. 36% of the learners mentioned Sri Lankan folktales and translated European fairy tales as the source of information, and only 18% of the learners selected Disney animated cartoons as their first experience of seeing these characters.



Figure

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To examine the impact of learning about European mythical creatures, the learners were asked whether they had changed their image of certain mythical creatures after the class room sessions. The learners had a mixed answer to this question where some have marked yes and some have stated that their image in mind was not harmed by the learning of mythical creatures in Grimm's fairy tales. But it was noted that they have identified that there is a considerable change in the attributes of mythical figures in Asian and European folklore.

When inquiring whether the learners have observed any similarities or differences between mythical characters in Sri Lanka and in German folktales, some learners have mentioned that Sri Lankan folktales have a limited number of mythical creatures compared to the mythical creatures in German folklore. An interesting answer provided by one of the learners was, that mythical creatures in Sri Lankan folklore tend to be furry creatures who are large in size, and creatures like dwarfs are rarely recognized in Sinhala folklore. In terms of morality, the supernatural beings in Sri Lankan stories are often attributed to evil and harmful actions, yet in German folklore they could also be helpful and bring good luck.

One of the main objectives of this research was to examine the impact of the previous knowledge of learners about mythical creatures. Therefore, when questioning whether the learners have encountered their previous knowledge of supernatural beings as a plus point or as an obstacle, almost every learner has marked that their previous knowledge of mythical creatures based on Sri Lankan folklore and information they received from digital media were helpful for them to recognize the mythical creatures in

Grimm's fairy tales. Yet, the researcher who observed their class room sessions believes, have identified that their previous knowledge was more of an obstacle than an assistance to them. The image of the mythical creatures formed in the learners' mind was based on Sri Lankan folklore. Nonetheless, Sri Lankan folklore, which was heavily influenced by Indian subcontinent myths and legends, contains a wide range of mythical creatures, including Indian deities and supernatural beings. Therefore, the picture that they had visualized was a very complicated image with different mythical creatures from several cultures.

When asked about the learners' opinion about using a reading exercise to teach about the historical background, some learners stated that, it is important to study superstitions related to witches in history in order to understand how this character was created by the brother Grimm, as witches are part of European history. Nonetheless, almost all of the students identified similarities between the medieval witches and the witch character in Grimm's fairy tales, which made them believe that the medieval witch hunt had inspired the Grimm brothers to create their own fairy tale witch character. Therefore, an in-depth study of medieval history was considered essential, by the learners, to critically analyze the contents of the witch character in Grimm's fairy tales.

The learners were then asked why they believe it is important to study mythical creatures when studying folklore literature. This question was used to identify whether the learners had understood why it was necessary to make a huge effort (to spend three class sessions which consisted of more than six hours of lecture ) to introduce the mythical creatures of Grimm's fairy tales. Few learners have written that mythical creatures are part of the folklore tradition and folktales without mythical beings do not exist. Apart from that, all the other learners stated that mythical creatures are part of the imagination of a particular group of people or a tribe. Therefore, the students have mentioned that, studying these creatures will allow language learners to become familiar with the beliefs, customs, norms, and ideologies of people from a distant culture.

### **Discussion of findings**

The class room observations have indicated that the Sri Lankan learners' perceptions of mythical creatures are formed through Sri Lankan folktales, Buddhist jataka tales, and through Indian legends. Because of foreign invasions and the arrival of settlers from India since the era of the ancient kingdoms, Sri Lankan mythology has been heavily influenced by Indian myths, with mythical creatures from Indian mythologies accepted as part of Sri Lankan folktales. Apart from that, Sri Lankan children have been familiarized with Sinhala and English translations of myths, legends, and European fairy tales since their childhood. Therefore, the image of the mythical creatures in Sri Lankan German language learners' minds can be considered as a twisted image which is a combination of Sri Lankan, Indian, and European mythical creatures. Therefore, their previous knowledge of mythical beings is considered by the researcher as an obstacle to the learning process. The learners have mentioned that the image of the fairy witch

character reminds them of the Sri Lankan fairy witch character 'bata kola achchi'. The learners describe the character of Bata Kola Achchi as a wicked old woman who practices black magic. Yet, the European witch in Grimm's fairy tale is a more advanced portrayal of a witch character who is not always presented as an old woman, but sometimes as a queen or a beautiful young lady with power and fortune who plays both the roles of a destroyer and a benefactor. Furthermore, the learners have identified similarities between the nymphs and the maidens in the Sigiriya frescos. Some learners have related the nymphs to the 'kinduru and kinduriyo' in Sanda Kinduru Jathakaya, yet nymphs in Sri Lankan literature, are depicted as previous births of Buddha or else as holy deities.

However, in European mythology, nymphs are considered a minor female nature deity who is portrayed as a personification of nature in literature, usually as extremely beautiful maidens. They are believed to be excellent singers and dancers and fortune tellers who can seduce humans through their voice. But they are not considered as holy spirits in European literature, but rather as spirits with twisted personalities who can be good and evil. Therefore, although there is a considerable similarity between the characters in both cultures, each culture has its own perception of the origin of these mythical creatures.

The objective of using images during the first class room session was to introduce the learners to the topic through images and to make them familiar with the basic key words related to the topic. Apart from that, visual materials, which are far more memorable than spoken words or written text, have assisted the learners in bringing back their childhood memories of these mythical creatures .

Yet the first class room session has proven that images are not only sufficient as learning materials when introducing, mythical characters of a distant culture. Therefore, the reading text with guided questions has allowed the learners to engage in an in-depth analysis of the historical background and understand how mythical creatures can be created based on historical incidents. Apart from that, the reading exercise has made the learners aware that the Grimm's witch character has a more historical origin than the Sri Lankan witch character, which was created by the mere fascination of translators who have translated the European fairy tales into Sinhala.

The third class room session, where the learners have conducted group research, has allowed them to engage in self-study without the interruption of the teachers, where they are instructed to find out about the origin of the mythical characters in Grimm's fairy tales through Germanic myths and other suitable online sources.

This exercise was helpful for the learners to decide themselves which materials are more suitable for them for the learning process. By asking the learner to present their findings through a post presentation, the researcher expected the learners' to connect different study materials such as visual and written text materials, and use their creativity to present the research findings. During the evaluation process, the researcher was impressed to see how the learners had achieved the learning outcomes by using Germanic myths as the primary sources of data collection and how they had carefully used trustworthy

online sources for their secondary data collection. Therefore, based on the class room observations and data collected from the questionnaires, the researcher can state that the main learning outcome of the lesson, which was to introduce the learners to mythical creatures in Grimm's Fairy Tales through suitable learning materials, was successfully achieved by incorporating images, reading text materials, and encouraging the learners to engage in self-learning exercises.

## Conclusion

According to the findings of the research, it is evident that the mythical creatures are part of the imagination of people which represents their beliefs, customs, traditions, and thinking patterns. The perception of mythical creatures in children's minds is formed by the oral narrations of the elderly during childhood. The pre knowledge of learners about mythical characters based on native folklore is an obstacle when introducing mythical creatures of a distant culture. Yet it is possible, through the study of carefully selected visual materials such as images, documentaries, and written manuscripts of legends and myths, to become familiar with the mythical creatures of a foreign culture.

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