

folk wisdom

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Folk wisdom drawn from countries around the world provides an excellent source of listening comprehension material for EFL students. In the fables attributed to the Greek slave Aesop, animals speak and act like humans displaying the human condition in a way that transcends international boundaries. The concluding stories come from Nasreddin Hodja, a Turkish figure who combines the qualities of sage and fool in dispensing folk wisdom.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES. Teachers may wish to devise comprehension questions or cloze activities to accompany each story included in this section. Students may be asked to restate the folk wisdom contained in these stories. Teachers should ask their students to share any stories from their own culture which express similar bits of wisdom.



Aesop's fables

1. SOUR GRAPES

A fox, who hadn't had a square meal in days, slipped into a vineyard one morning. He saw a juicy, ripe bunch of grapes hanging from a vine overhead. He jumped for them, but they were just out of reach. "Oh, well," he panted. "Those grapes were probably sour, anyway."

2. THE STUPID DONKEY

A hungry lion slipped out of the forest into a barnyard one evening. When he saw a plump donkey, his mouth began to water. But just as he was ready to jump on the donkey, a rooster crowed. He was frightened, and so turned away into the forest again. "Hey, look at that cowardly lion," the donkey brayed to the rooster. "I'm going to chase him." And the donkey ran after the lion. "Wait!" the rooster shouted, "you don't know that..." But it was too late. The lion had turned and killed the donkey. "Ah, my poor, stupid friend," the rooster said as he watched the lion eating the donkey. "The lion wasn't afraid of you, but of my crowing."

3. THE DONKEY AND THE LION'S SKIN

A donkey—not the same one as in the second story, but one just as stupid—found a lion's skin in the forest one afternoon. He put it on and went to the barnyard to frighten the other animals. "Hee-haw, I'm a lion," the donkey brayed at a rooster. "That's a pretty stupid joke," the rooster said. "Even though you look like a lion, anyone can tell you're a donkey as soon as you open your mouth."

4. THE DOVE AND THE HAWKS

A chicken grower set a trap for hawks that had been attacking his flock. One afternoon he found a dove in his net. "Let me go. I'm not a hawk," the dove begged. The chicken grower agreed, "Maybe not. But I'm not going to let you go. You're as bad as they are, if you're with them. After all, birds of a feather flock together."

5. THE ANT AND THE GRASSHOPPER

While a grasshopper was taking it easy in the shade one hot summer's day, an ant struggled in the sun with a grain of rice that he was carrying out to his nest. "Hey, Mister Ant," the grasshopper said. "Why don't you take it easy, like me? You can work tomorrow." The ant paused. "I'm saving up food now for the cold winter ahead, and if you know what's good for you, you'll do the same," he said. Three or four months later, winter came and it was very cold. While the ant was snug in his nest, the starving grasshopper shivered under a pile of dead leaves and wished that he'd paid attention to the ant's advice.

6. THE STAG'S ANTLERS

A stag admired his reflection in a pool of water one day. "My! But my antlers are very handsome," he thought. "Just look at my poor skinny legs, though. They look as if

they could hardly bear my weight.” Just then a lion leaped from the bushes at the edge of the water hole, and the frightened stag ran across the open field. He could run much faster than the lion, who was quickly left behind. But when the stag ran into the forest at the other side of the field, he ran into trouble. His antlers became tangled in some vines hanging from a tree. As the lion was catching up with him, the stag struggled frantically to free himself, and thought: “What a fool I am! As long as I could use my skinny legs, I could outrun that lion. But here I am now, trapped by the antlers I admired so much.”

7. THE LION AND THE MOUSE

A lion who was stalking a deer in the forest, almost stepped on a mouse one morning. “Please Mister Lion,” squeaked the mouse. “Don’t eat me. Why, I’d barely be a mouthful for you.” “You’re right,” said the lion, and he carefully stepped around the tiny creature. Later that same day, the mouse found the lion trapped in a net which had been set by hunters to capture wild animals. With his sharp teeth, the mouse soon gnawed through the tangles in the net, and the lion was free. “Thanks a lot, little friend. Now, how can I repay you?” the lion asked. “Never mind,” the mouse said. “After all, you let me go free earlier today, and one good turn deserves another.”

8. PLEASING EVERYONE

Since an old man and his son wanted to sell their donkey at the village market far away from their home, they had to take the animal along a dusty country road to the town. They had just left their home when a neighbor called to them. “Why are both of you walking, when you have a donkey?” the neighbor asked. “One of you ride, and the other can lead him.” “That’s a good idea,” the old man said, and put his son on the donkey while he continued to lead.

They were about halfway to town when three women standing by the side of the road scolded the boy. “You should be ashamed of yourself, riding while your father has to walk,” one of the women said. “Is the donkey so weak that he can’t carry both of you?

“You’re right, I guess,” the old man said. “Let me get on behind you, son.” The donkey, carrying the old man and his son, had almost reached the town when a group of villagers began laughing at them. “You should be carrying that poor beast, instead of making him carry both of you,” one of the villagers said. “I suppose so,” the old man said reluctantly as he and his son got down. With the help of the still laughing villagers, they tied the animal to a pole so that they could carry it the rest of the way to the market. But as they were crossing the bridge just before the marketplace, the donkey kicked loose from the pole and fell into the stream and drowned. “Our donkey is dead now, and it should teach us,” the old man said sadly to his son. “Whenever we try to please everyone, we lose.”



Nasreddin Hodja stories

1. THE DONKEY BRAYS

One day a friend visited Hodja and said “Hodja, I want to borrow your donkey.” “I’m sorry,” replied Hodja, “but I’ve already lent it to someone else.” As soon as he said this, the donkey brayed.

“But Hodja, I can hear the donkey! It’s in the stable!” Shutting the door in his friend’s face, Hodja told him with dignity, “A man who believes the word of a donkey above my word doesn’t deserve to be lent anything!”

2. THE INTERRUPTED DREAM

While taking a nap on the porch, one hot summer day, Hodja dreamed that a stranger promised to give him ten pieces of gold. The stranger placed them in Hodja’s hand one by one until he reached the tenth piece, which he hesitated to give him.

“Come on! What are you waiting for?” said Hodja. “You promised me ten!” Just then he woke up. He immediately looked at this hand and saw that it was empty. He quickly shut his eyes again, stretched out his hand and said, “All right, I’ll settle for nine!”

3. THE NOISE

One day his neighbors asked Hodja, “We heard some noises in your house last night and we wondered what was happening.” Hodja told them, “My cloak fell down the stairs.”

They replied, “But Hodja, a cloak is just made out of cloth. It couldn’t have made that much noise!” Hodja answered impatiently, “Well, I was in it!”

4. ATTAINING WISDOM

Once someone asked Hodja, “How can one attain wisdom?” Hodja replied, “Always listen attentively to what the wise and learned men tell you. And when you are speaking to others, listen carefully to what you are saying!”

5. QUESTIONS

One day a neighbor inquired of Hodja, “Why do you always answer a question with another question?” He replied, “Do I?”

6. SUN and MOON

Hodja entered the tea shop one day and proclaimed profoundly, "The moon is more useful than the sun." "Why, Hodja?" they inquired. "Because we need the light more during the night when it is dark than during the daytime when it is light!"

7. A BARGAIN

The Hodja always wanted to learn something new, and one day he had a sudden inspiration to learn how to play the lute. He approached a music teacher and asked him, "How much do you charge for private lute lessons?" "Three silver pieces for the first month; after that one silver piece a month." "Oh, great!" exclaimed Hodja. "Then I'll start with the second month."

8. LOST

One day Hodja lost his donkey. While looking for it he was also rejoicing. When the people saw him they couldn't figure out why he was so happy. When they asked him the reason, Hodja told them, "I'm happy because I wasn't riding the donkey when it got lost. If I had been, I'd be lost now, too!"



tall tales

A farmer was telling a stranger about a remarkable ointment he used on his cows. "You can cut off a cow's tail, rub the ointment on the stump, and a new tail will grow on the cow in five days."

"That's nothing," the stranger said. "In Wisconsin, you can cut off a cow's tail, rub OUR ointment on the end of the TAIL, and in four days a new cow grows on the end of the old tail."

Farmer John said "I had a hen that sat on a piece of ice and hatched out a quart of warm water."

"That's nothing," answered Farmer Tom. "I had a hen once that I fed sawdust to by mistake. She laid twelve eggs; and when they hatched, eleven of the chicks had wooden legs, and the twelfth was a woodpecker."



A fast train raced along the border of the biggest cattle ranch in Montana. A passenger gazed at the huge herds, and when the train finally passed the other boundary of the ranch, he turned to the man who was sitting beside him and said, "What a huge herd of cattle! I counted 13,750 head."

The man was surprised. "That's amazing!" he answered. "I own that ranch and you are exactly right! I have exactly 13,750 head of cattle. How were you able to count them so fast?"

"It was easy. I just counted their legs and divided by four."

The Iowa farmer said, "I have a friend who can run so fast that he can throw a baseball from the pitcher's mound, run to the plate and hit the ball as it whizzes past."

"You should see my cousin," said the other farmer. "He's so fast that he can blow out a candle and be undressed and in bed by the time the room gets dark."

"It was so cold last winter," said the Minnesota farmer, "that a sheep jumping into my truck just froze in mid-air."

"That's impossible!" the stranger said. "That would defy the law of gravity."

"Yes," answered the farmer. "In normal conditions that is true, but it was soooo cold that the law of gravity was frozen too!"