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Preface

In school I had been told that materials real people use for real reasons were better for teaching than materials contrived to teach grammar or vocabulary. Sounded good, but it left me with a question: What do you use with low-level adults? Soup cans, clothing labels, and bus schedules can be used for only so long, and they don't go much beyond survival-level skills. Was there any real language that fit somewhere between soup cans and the newspaper, or was I stuck teaching grammar and vocabulary with artificial texts until students reached a higher level?

I thought about children's and adolescents' literature. Although I think both have useful features, neither seemed right for adult beginners. Most early children's books aren't interesting or challenging enough for adults. And literature for older children and adolescents quite quickly becomes fairly sophisticated: The vocabulary, idiom, and style make them impossible for beginners.

As I continued my search, I began to consider folktales. These stories contain a striking mix of the typical characteristics of children's and adult literature, a mix that might be ideal for the audience I was trying to reach. I began to experiment with folktales with a group of Asian immigrant students I was teaching (some of whom were completely illiterate and most of whom had not made it beyond survival skills). I found that folktales effectively addressed my lowest and highest students at the same time and helped me work on a variety of important language items. Equally important, the folktales generated considerable interest and enthusiasm from my students; at the end of the course, they indicated that the folktales were their favorite part of the program.

As I continued to explore the possibilities folktales offered, I found that I had stumbled on much more than I was looking for. Folktales turned out to be well suited to the development of language and cognitive skills at nearly any level. I have since used folktales in other beginning immigrant classes, in advanced writing classes, and for various intermediate levels. In addition, although folktales have often been used successfully with children, in classes in which there were both children and adults, I found that folktales could simultaneously capture the attention of both.

This book grew out of that exploration. It offers some reflections on why folktales are good for language teaching. It also provides a collection

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of activities that have worked well in addressing a variety of language needs. And it provides a number of useful stories to get you started and some sources to help you begin to find stories of your own.

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