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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Scope for Teaching English Communication through English Short Stories

Uttam Ramchandra Patil

Assistant Professor & Head,

Department of English,

Rajarshi Shahu Arts and Commerce College, Rukadi
Tal. Hatkanangale, Dist. Kolhapur [Maharashtra]

Abstract:

During the last few decades, English in India has undergone a considerable change in its status. It had been the Official Language, Second Language, Third Language, Foreign Language, Library Language and Lingua Franca, etc. In the present context, English is no more a Window or Door of the world. It has emerged as the language of the world in this era of globalization. It is the language through which the world is craving to communicate. Naturally, there are institutions cropping up with the sole aim to teach English communication. Every possible way is being tried by the honest and sincere English language pedagogues to make efforts fruitful. Unfortunately, the output, it can be seen, is not as per the expectations.

This might be due to indifference to English literature while teaching English Communication. It seems that it is usually forgotten that language can be bettered through the exposure to the literature in that language. The students are taught about English language in the classes of English communication. They are seldom, it can be observed, taught English except a few opportunities for oral presentation. The genres of literature like the novel, the short story, and the plays can prove very useful in teaching English communication. The short stories, especially, can be an effective tool for teaching English communication. They are full of the real speech acts which can better expose students to the subtleties of communication in English. There is plenty of scope for teaching English communication through English Short Stories. The present paper is an effort to justify it.

Keywords: globalization, English communication, pedagogue, literature, language, short story

It can be vividly observed that these days English has emerged as the language of the globe. The world seems impossible without English language. Every person, especially the literate, feels himself or herself incomplete, if having the lacunae of English language. Hence, the world is crazy to know English. Unfortunately, the majority of the people in the world can only learn about this language. They cannot acquire it, as it is not their mother-tongue. Usually when English is taught or learned as a second or foreign language, as it is mostly done in India, the learners learn about English

rather than they learn English. They are made to know about English rather than they know English. Hence, it is the telling truth of teaching English, it can be observed, that at every stage of education English is taught and learned to improve it on the part of the learners. English is no more just a foreign language, link language, or official language. It has come up as a language of day to day communication during the last few years. In India English is no more just the language of the Babus or a library language. According to Braj Kachru, “English has become an integral part of the country’s linguistic ecology and is widely perceived as a language of power and opportunity. It invariably occupies a prominent ‘second’ position in Indian trilingualism and is used by the educated population, along with Hindi or other regional languages.”¹ Almost all over India, English is an obligatory part of the curricula. At most schools English is taught right from the first standard or from the fifth standard. Hence, an Indian student learns English for either 8 years or 12 years before he/she commences his/her degree courses. However, it is shocking that most of the undergraduate students cannot communicate properly in English. R.K. Singh, in this context, remarks, “It appears a colossal waste of resources if most of the university graduates cannot use the English they learn from year 3 onwards in ‘real-life’ situations. The state of teaching English is such that communication is simply not induced; and ironically, a great majority of about 36% of the educated population are literate non-readers.”² This fairly indicates that something goes wrong with the whole pedagogical process. The students are learning English which is taught to them. They get good grades also. But when it comes to actual communication (spoken or written) students do it neither confidently nor competently. This is happening with most of the students but surprisingly even with the students who take English as the special subject for their graduation. Then a telling question arises in the academia why English literature is taught and learnt. Is it really possible to teach or learn English language with the help of English literature? If it is possible, then to what extent can the teaching and learning of the English short stories be utilized to attain this goal, as almost all English curricula have English short stories in them? The present paper is an effort to point out the ways through which English communication can be induced through the teaching of English literature, especially, English short stories.

It would be better to initiate the argument by focusing the relationship between LANGUAGE and LITERATURE. Language is the origin of literature. Without language literature is impossible. Literature is a by-product of language. It enriches the language into which it is created. Language is a cultural and social phenomenon. A literary artisan uses language to give vent to his emotions, feelings, ideas, and experiences which can be both real and imaginary. The two primary objectives of literature are: 1) to entertain the readers and 2) to educate them. While attaining these two objectives literature knowingly or unknowingly broadens the linguistic understanding and shapes linguistic abilities of the readers.

As far as English language and Indian context is concerned the matter reaches a crucial point. Though English is being used and taught and learnt in India for more than one and half century, it has not acquired and will hardly get the status of first language for the vast majority of the Indians. In Indian academia English is, it can be observed, taught and learnt not as a language but as a subject to be passed out to obtain a certificate or a degree. It would not be wrong to point out that the teachers (a few exceptions) teach English only to help students pass out a course. English is taught to make students know

about English and not to make them know English. How can a foreign person (an Indian student) know English? To know English means to develop the abilities to use it in day to day activities. The academicians are putting Herculean efforts to enable students to communicate in English. They design special courses in spoken English. The students are provided with ample exposure to English language. Still the problem can not be completely solved. Text-books with sections especially devoted to English communication skills are designed, but that has, it can be seen, proved futile too.

Basically English teaching is done in two discernible facets: 1) teaching English language which involves teaching of English phonology and grammar and 2) teaching English literature which consists of teaching of literature written in English language (not necessarily only the literature created by the writers of England). This division has created a new issue among the teachers teaching English at the Under-graduate and even at the Post-graduate level. The teachers of English, it can be observed, bifurcate themselves into two groups: 1. Professors of English language and 2. Professors of English literature. This ridiculous bifurcation has been the basic reason behind the students being deficient in English communication. The teacher who knows English language well can teach English literature well. How is it possible to teach English literature without the knowledge of its language? Unfortunately there seems rivalry between the professors of English language and literature. Language teachers focus on phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of English. On the other hand the teachers who teach literature concentrate mostly on the literary features such as plot, character, setting, conflict, themes, and techniques in the literary work being taught. No doubt, the use of language is given space, but it is very limited. Short story is a genre of literature which is a kind of communication. It is the writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Basically literature, that is poetry, short stories, prose-fiction, plays, biographies, autobiographies, essays, etc. to be specific, is narration and description of what is seen and imagined by the literary artist. This means literature allows the writer to communicate his/her experiences, thoughts, feelings, and imagination. W. H. Hudson offers four elements of literature, viz. 1) Intellectual element 2) Element of Imagination 3) Emotional element and 4) Technical element.³

Literature, like language, is social phenomenon, though some writers claim that they write for their personal sake. Generally, literature is created by the people, of the people, and for the people. This is also the basic principle of communication. Though literature (especially English literature which is the part of curricula) is always in written mode, it can be and must be utilized to develop communication skills. This is applicable to any second language learning situation. Students are deficient in English communication as they are not amply exposed to it. They are seldom offered opportunities to use English. They study or are taught English literature very seldom to develop their English communication.

Literature is a kind of multi-leveled and multi-faceted communication. Simultaneously, it can be used as an important material for teaching the communication skills. Any work of literature is engaged in narrating stories; describing persons, places, processes, emotions, and what not; expressing novel ideal, images, emotions, and feelings with the help of characters which are ultimately human beings or humanized animals, trees, objects, and even supernatural beings. These characters are engaged in all kinds of activities, possible and impossible or probable and improbable

which are related by the writer with the help of linguistic techniques. This means that a work of literature utilizes all the functions of the language. Therefore, in teaching English communication to the Indian under-graduates, English literature can be of great help. Literature exposes the students to all kinds of ways and situations in which English language is used. In this way, English literature facilitates the students acquire the English communicative competence. This is justified in the remaining part of the paper by exemplifying some selected extracts from selected English short stories.

Now let us concentrate on how English short stories can be the effective tool of teaching English communication. The researcher gives preference to the short stories, as they are especially suitable. The short story as a genre of literature came into vogue in the 20th century. Under the influence of modern life the short stories flourished. The short stories, in comparison to the novels, can make reading interesting. They are short. In his preface to his *Complete Short Stories* Somerset Maugham remarks that the shortest short story runs about 1,600 words and the longest to about 20,000 words.⁴ The length of the story makes the students feel at home. Even the teachers find it easy to present the short story in detail to the class. They can read it to the students. This can seldom happen with the novels which are usually long.

As the short stories are smaller in size the students can read them for many times. This would provide them better exposure to English. A common student can read the short stories that run into a few pages. A student with good knowledge of English can enjoy a short story within a single seating. Reading of short stories is not as strenuous as it can be of a novel for an average student. Hence, English short stories are an effective tool to cultivate reading habits among the students. Almost all the students are proffered the largest exposure to English through reading. Even teachers also find it feasible to read the stories to the class and pay attention to the linguistic features in detail. This offers the teacher an opportunity to develop listening skill in the students. If the stories are presented to the class with proper stress and intonation, the students can develop even the speaking skills.

Short stories are very useful in teaching English communication in that they display all the basic functions of language. The functions of language are narration, description, conversation, expression, interrogation, and explanation, etc. In day to day communication language is put to the above functions. The most used functions are narration, description, conversation and expression. To be simple, to communicate means to narrate the events and experiences; to describe the people, places, and everything around; to engage in conversation i.e. face to face communication and to express feelings, emotions, desires, hopes, and what not.

Stories are chiefly narrations. They are the tales told. The authors narrate their experiences in the short stories. A short story has a plot which consists of a single important event in the life of the character which are mainly human i.e. men and women. The students can be taught how to narrate their experiences in English through the teaching of English short stories. After teaching a short story, the teacher may ask the students to narrate that story into their own words. This provides a good exercise to the students to better their English communication. The short narratives can help the students to excel in the art narration in English. The short stories juxtapose all kinds of narrations, viz. 1st person narration, and 3rd person narration. The modern narrative techniques like stream of consciousness are also employed. Hence, a short story can exemplify to the

students how think to in English. Because of their simple plots, the short stories are rather easy to understand than novels which have fairly complex plots. A vast majority of the short stories have simple plots. The stories written by Ruskin Bond, O' Henry, Guy de Maupassant, Leo Tolstoy, D. H. Lawrence and many other authors have simple plots. For example, Ruskin Bond's "The Night at Train at Deoli" narrates the author's experience of first love. The following two small paragraphs from Leo Tolstoy's one of the masterpieces, 'The Grain that was Like an Egg' is a telling example of how narration can be done:

*"Once upon a time some children found, in a ravine a little round something that was like an egg; but it also had a groove down the middle, and so was like a grain of corn. A passer-by saw this something in the children's hands, and bought it off them for a **piatak**. Then he took it away to town and sold it to the Tsar as a curiosity.*

*The Tsar sent for his wise men, and commanded them to examine the little found something and to say if it was an egg or a grain of corn. The wise men pondered and pondered, but could not solve the problem."*⁵

How simple the narration is! It flows with same simplicity through out the short story. Teaching of such a short story in the class-room facilitates learning of narration technique in English. If the students are constantly exposed to such short stories, they would surely acquire the technique of narration in English easily. Most of the short story writers are excellent story tellers. Naturally, students get the idea of how to narrate experiences, incidents, and other happenings in their life after studying short stories.

Short stories are rich in description. The literary artisans give picturesque and vivid description of characters. It is not just outward physical description. The writers describe the mood, the mind of the characters. The following extract from Ruskin Bond's short story, 'The Night Train at Deoli' is an axiomatic example:

*"... the girl had a shawl thrown across her shoulder. Her feet were bare and her clothes were old, but she was a young girl, walking gracefully and with dignity ...She had a pale skin, set off by shiny black hair, and dark troubled eyes. And then those eyes, searching and eloquent met mine"*⁶

Furthermore, the following excerpt from 'The Romance of a Busy Broker' penned by O'Henry exemplifies excellently how description is done in English:

*"The young lady had been Maxwell's secretary for a year. She was beautiful in a way that was quite unsecretarial. She dressed in a very simple manner. She wore no chains, bracelets or locketts. She did not look as though she were going to accept an invitation for lunch. Her dress was gray and plain, but fitted her bery well. In her neat black hat was the golden feather of a parrot. On this morning she was softly and shyly glowing. Her eyes were dreamily bright, her cheeks rosy, her expression a happy one, with a touch of some sweet memory."*⁷

Every short story has such and even more detailed descriptions of human characters and also the descriptions of animals and birds. The writers describe not only the characters but also the places. The telling illustration can be the following extract from Ruskin

Bond's short story, 'The Night Train at Deoli' in which Deoli railway station is described:

*The train would reach Deoli at about five in the morning, when the station would be dimly lit with electric bulbs and oil-lamps, and the jungle across the railway tracks would just be visible in the faint light of dawn. Deoli had only one platform, an office for the station-master and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendour, and a few stray dogs; not much else, because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests"*⁸

Such descriptions are scattered in almost all the short stories. These examples can prove very fruitful in helping students master how to describe the places in English language.

In addition to narration and description, students can be exposed to English conversation, while teaching short stories. "Dialogue, well managed, according to W. H. Hudson, ... is one of the most delightful elements of a novel(this is also applicable to any short story); it is that part of it in which we seem to get most intimately into touch with people."⁹ Dialogue makes a short story lively and real. Similarly, it shows the readers how English is spoken in day-to-day conversation. Writers use dialogue with all the peculiar colours and aspects of spoken English. Here dialogue has typical grammar of conversational English.. If these dialogues are presented properly to students, it would help them learn English communication to a better extent. The dialogue presents the functions of language such as advice, suggestion, permission, order, etc. It's almost like real English speech which can be very formal as in Katherine Mansfield's short story, 'A Cup of Tea' in which a beggarly girl, Miss Smith requests Madam Rosemary Fell:

"Madam, may I speak to you a moment?"

"Speak to me?" Rosemary turned ...

*"M-madam" stammered the voice. "Would you let me have the price of a cup of tea?"*¹⁰

And very personal, intimate and informal like the following one from O'Henry's 'The Gift of the Magi':

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice – what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labour.

*"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. May be the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"*¹¹

The above is the conversation between the husband and the wife who love each other truly. The intimacy in their relationship is displayed through the way they address each other. It expresses their tender feelings and emotions.

Such dialogues exhibit the true English speech events through which a student can be taught and exposed to the ways people speak English. Short stories have a small scope for dialogues. Nevertheless through dialogues the students are exposed to the idiolectal, social, regional and even national varieties of English.

Dialogues display oral English communication. They are the speech acts which are presented intermittently in the short stories. They can be taken as approximate English speech acts. For instance the following extract from the short story, "The Last Leaf" by O' Henry exemplifies how a toothless old man like Old Behrman can speak English:

*"Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off from a confounded vine? I haf not heard of such a thing. No, I will not bese as a model for your fool bermit-dunderhead. Vy do you allow dot silly pusiness to come in der brain of her? Ach, dot poor leetle Miss-Yohnsy."*¹²

The idiosyncratic spellings indicate the phonemic realization of the character's speech.

Similarly, the instances of conversation in the short stories follow the communicative grammar of English which is far different from the actual rules of English grammar that are taught to the students who always seem to be under the impression that there can be nothing ungrammatical in English. Thus, the study of the short stories can help the students to have an access and exposure to the actual English speech acts which are not easily in the scope of the foreign students.

To conclude, every syllabus of English has short stories. There is absolute mayhem about English communication on the part of the students due to want of ample exposure to English language and lack of practice. They know a lot about English but they know little English. They are taught English grammar and all that but they are seldom given opportunity to use the knowledge or experience its use by others. They are usually taught about English (and that is done mostly in their mother-tongue) but not English in English.

Teaching of English short stories can be used to develop socio-cultural competence in English of the Indian students.. The communicative competence can be acquired not just through the linguistic competence, but it requires socio-cultural competence English short stories provide socio-cultural exposure to the students. That is why they should be considered valid instructional material for the purposes developing higher communicative competence. This would also put end to the so called language-literature rivalry among the teachers.

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