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Relevance of Using Literature as an Approach to Teaching English Communication to Indian Beginners

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Abstract:

English language is an easy means of communication in the global sphere of life. It emerges as the language of the world in this rapid era of globalization. English is the most widely spoken language in the world. In a way, English has ceased to be the language of its native speakers only. The wide distribution and popularity of the language has earned it the status of the medium of international communication. A person who knows English is sure to be understood anywhere in the world. The need for communication has become very significant. In the present scenario and basically in the face of phenomenal advancement of information technology, the concept of distance has totally changed and a learner may have glimpses of reality of a far away country situated in the distant corner of the globe. Thus the present day learners need to be aware of the world's vast matrix too. Hence, learning English for the purpose of communication has gained importance in this perspective also. Communication is a process of meaningful interaction among human beings to initiate, execute, accomplish, or prevent certain actions. Communication is, thus, the nervous system of the human society. Without communication, a society is lifeless and its very existence is in danger. Above all, communication is the sum of all things, one person does when he/she wants to create understanding in the minds of another and it involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and/ or understanding. The present paper is an endeavour to find scope for teaching English communication using English literature as a tool.

Keywords: Globalization, English literature, English language, communication, pragmatics, competence.

The need for learning English language for maintaining a proper communication is essentially very obvious. For this sole purpose there have been several efforts to bring about a success in the teaching- learning process of English language. Every possible endeavour are being carried out in order to make the language learning fruitful but unfortunately the output is not as per the expectation. The all round development of the skill is not up to the mark. If one aspect of the learning abounds in certain areas, it falls short of others. For example, if one learner somehow reaches a considerable level in speaking in English, he/ she may not be able to apply the language in a situationaly appropriate and suitably meaningful way. So it may be considered that either the English language learner is unable to express what he/she actually feels at a particular moment of conversation with a conversationalist or he /she lacks the sensibility of the earnestness of good conversation. This is to say, the English learners should not become structure speakers but should learn to communicate their ideas, opinions, feelings which are their own and solely own. They should not learn about the language but the language itself. Then only the purpose of learning the language will be served. They must feel easy to communicate the language in a proper and systematic way.

Language is that with which we communicate with other people and reach our experiences, feelings, wishes, desires, ideas and needs. Language is a cultural and social phenomenon. Literature, in a way, may be said to be the by-product of language. Language is the origin of

literature. Without language, literature is impossible. Literature enriches the language into which it is created. Literature, on the other hand, entertains and educates the readers and consciously or unconsciously broadens the linguistic understanding and shapes linguistic abilities of the readers too. Thus, the approach to teaching language through the mode of literature may be taken into consideration.

It has been observed that the Indian learners of English language find difficulty with how to convey different kinds of meanings with the use of language or how to express a variety of meanings with variety of situations. The real role of persons in language use is utterly missing. In most of the cases, Indian learners of English language cannot express their feelings, desires, point of views and variety of things about their culture, society and so on in the proper sense of the term. Whereas, it has been noted that they have desires and wishes to express them. But they are unable to express them. Herein lays the relevance of pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of language used by real people in the real context. Pragmatics tries to study human beings at their characterization, feelings, attitudes, needs, volition or volatile personality and other things through language. David Crystal in his book, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* says:

Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication. (240)

As literature creates a world of its own with the language ingrained in it, the learners can easily get a firsthand knowledge of the point of view of the language users and also assimilate ways of evading the constraints they encounter in using the language in social interaction. The study of literature can relate to the pragmatics implicitly in this way.

It is really unfortunate to note that multitude of the learners of English cannot acquire the language as it is not their mother tongue. Usually when English is taught or learned as a second language, as it is mostly done in India, the learners learn about English rather than they learn English. The learners cannot use the language in the same way as they do with their mother-tongue. It may be due to the fact that the learners get very little exposure to the language in real life situation. In order to do away with this problem the approach to teaching language through the mode of literature may bear fruit. Literature is a kind of multi faceted and multi layered communication power house. Any work of literature is engaged in narrating real or fictionalised stories; describing persons, places, processes of real life situations, emotions, and many more. Literature expresses ways of life, novel ideas, images and feelings with the help of characters which are over all human beings or humanised animals, natural objects and even supernatural beings and magic. In a way, literature encompasses the whole world in its natural and lively form. The characters in the literature are engaged in various kinds of activities and situations, possible and impossible, probable and improbable, real or fictitious which are all conveyed by the writer with the help of linguistic techniques. Thus by reading literature the learners can make the most in respect of getting a knowledge of the proper situation and context of speaking. Since literature appeals to our heart and it generates emotions and feelings in our mind which touches us, it can alleviate the paucity of the proper exposure to the language. The direct touch of emotions derived from the literary work can prepare grounds and solid foundations to the learners to deal with in real life situations, real context of conversations and in real role of conversationalist. Besides literature utilizes various functions of language and in this way,

exposes the learners to various ways and situations in which language is used. Thus, for teaching communication in English to Indian learners English literature can avail a lot.

English literature makes provision for the learners to acquire not only linguistic competence and communicative competence but it makes way for acquiring pragmatic competence as well. Dell Hymes's concept of 'communicative competence' (coined in 1972) originated as a resistance to the concept of 'linguistic competence' introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1965. But now most scholars consider linguistic competence to be a part of communicative competence. Eva M. Fernandez and Helen Smith Cairns in *Fundamentals of Psycholinguistics* opined:

Linguistic competence constitutes knowledge of language, but that knowledge is tacit, implicit. This means that people do not have conscious access to the principles and rules that govern the combination of sounds, words, and sentences; however, they do recognize when those rules and principles have been violated. . . . For example, when a person judges that the sentence 'John said that Jane helped himself' is ungrammatical; it is because the person has tacit knowledge of the grammatical principle that reflexive pronouns must refer to an NP in the same clause. (67)

Pragmatics is a systematic way of explaining language use in context. Every context has a special meaning and it is the context which decides meaning. So meaning is determined by the relative quality of language used and the intention of speaker to the listener. Pragmatics is the study of what the speaker means by saying something and what the listener understands when something is said or how does a speaker use language in a particular context and how it is interpreted in the use of same context. Pragmatics is also concerned with the management that is how people manage different kinds of situations. The competence with which a situation is handled is known as 'pragmatic competence.' The data for pragmatics comes from day-to-day speech, used by the user of language in different context. According to Noam Chomsky in his *Rules and Representations*, "Pragmatic competence is the one that underlies the ability to use language along with the conceptual system to achieve certain ends or purposes" (24). It determines how the tool can be effectively put to use and it is user-oriented. Thus by studying literary works where the speech of the characters comes in proper context English language, learners can master conceptions of proper language use. If a primary habit of language use in proper context is acquired then exact use of language in real life context comes naturally and spontaneously. The requirement for the Indian learners is to get accustomed to a context based situation for language acquisition.

In novels the narrations and dialogues may contribute to the enhancement of scope for oral English communication. As the canvas of the novel is much more broad than other literary works it can lend out a proper atmosphere which is apt and vast. Novel creates a world of its own and it can provide maximum exposure to the advanced learners. It bears the probability of making a learner proficient and efficient enough in the process of communication. Besides it can help to develop the inner confidence of the learners.

The following is a passage from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*:

"Mr. Hareton will ask the master to send you upstairs, if you don't behave!" I said. He had not only twitched his shoulder, but clenched his fist, as if tempted to use it.

"I know why Hareton never speaks, when I am in the kitchen," she exclaimed, on another occasion. "He is afraid I shall laugh at him. Ellen, what do you think? He began to teach himself to read once; and, because I laughed, he burned his books, and dropped it- was he cot

a fool? "Were you not naughty?" I said; "answer me that." "Perhaps I was," she went on, "but I did not expect him to be so silly. Hareton, if I gave you a book, would you take it now? I'll try!" She placed one she had been perusing on his hand; he flung it off, and muttered, is she did not give over, he would break her neck. " Well, I shall put it here," she said, "in the table drawer, and I'm going to bed." (237)

How lively and down to earth the narration is! To the sensitive reader it seems that the reader is present during the conversation process. The reader is unconsciously getting accustomed to the situation in which the language is used and at the same time the learner is also getting an exposure to the contexts of the discourse. In this way the learners may get accustomed to the various contexts of discourse and in their own turn may assimilate these or at least get some idea of day to day communication mode in English. Thus reading novels can aid to the development of communication skill for advanced learners.

The study of drama also contributes to the teaching the communication skill in the learners. Dramatic mode of literature may prove highly beneficial to the average learners i.e. the learners who have passed the stage of beginners but still not belonging to the status of advanced learners. The dialogue form of the text can help them to get to the text easily. The dialogues provide distinct demarcation of the speakers and in addition to this, drama maintains the context of conversation also. Thus, in the small canvas of a drama, a learner can get the exposure to the language easily. In the following passage from *Arms and the Man*, a learner may easily recognise the tone and situation of the dialogues:

The man: I've no ammunition. What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead; and finished the last cake of that hours ago.

Raina: (outraged in her most cherished ideals of manhood) Chocolate! Do you stuff your pockets with sweets—like a school-boy—even in the field?

The man: (grinning) Yes: isn't it contemptible? (Hungrily) I wish I had some now.

Raina: Allow me. (She sails away scornfully to the chest of drawers, and returns with the box of confectionery in her hand). I am sorry I have eaten them all except these. (She offers him the box.) (12)

These simple dialogues embed the genuine mode of communication in a particular context. The modes and gestures mentioned in the parenthesis further help the learners to understand the contexts and tone of conversation. Thus, reading drama also contributes to the development of communication with respect to proper context of conversation.

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. By reading English short stories a learner can gather for himself socio-cultural exposure too. A very personal, intimate and informal communication like the following one from O'Henry's 'The Gift of the Magi' testifies to the above assertion.

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? (4)

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 language learner can be taught and exposed to the ways people speak English. Short stories have a small scope for dialogues. Nevertheless through dialogues the learners are exposed to the idiolectal, social and regional varieties of English. 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 learners 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 learners to have an access and exposure to the actual English speech acts which are not easily in the scope of the English learners in India. The diversity in the use of the modes of languages is significantly notable.

Thus, English literature can contribute a lot to the learning of English language. The limitation of the lack of proper exposure to the language can be supplemented by the vast collection of available literary works in India. This can also elapse the gap of the proper availability of teaching aids or audio-visual devices. Using literature as an approach to teaching English communication is very much economical for Indian learners also because it is independent of the problem of getting efficient language teaching experts. It is not easy to get efficient language teaching experts always. Besides the task of handling a learner by an expert alone is very laborious. It demands a lot from the expert and it is quite difficult to meet the demands of all the individual learners at a particular point of time. Learning language by reading literary works is convenient to the learners also because it is independent of the time of learning. No classroom work is required and a learner may go on reading a literary book during his leisure or while travelling or before going to bed. It is however noteworthy that the learner, in this case, does not master or memorise the dialogues or languages in a matter of fact manner but assimilate the tone, manner or mode with reference to the context so as to form a natural environment of communication. This may in turn lead to the acquisition of the language.

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