Integrating Short Stories in the ESL Classroom for Developing Learners' Communicative Competence

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Abstract

This paper aims at emphasizing the use of short stories in English language teaching classrooms, for developing students' communicative competence. It also attempts to find out the problems of learning language skills by the tertiary level learners of engineering colleges and offers solutions to overcome those problems. The identified common problems are: learners' lack of interest in their subject, lack of opportunity to speak in the class room and no room for creative writing. In addition to that most students do not have confidence to speak to their peer groups or friends as they come from vernacular medium with less vocabulary stock. Again the existing syllabus given to engineering students for technical English has also widened the gap between students' interest in the subject and their communication skills. Hence this paper attempts to prove that the proper integration of short stories into the syllabus is expected to bridge the abovementioned gap by way of creating interest in their subjects and motivating the learners further and further to acquire all the four skills, i.e., LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing), which are necessary for effective communication.

Key words: Short stories, communicative competence, ESL classroom

Introduction

It is well known that the English language has become a Global language. In some countries it has been used as mother tongue and in other countries it is learnt as a second language. In that way, English language is the only medium of communication/ instruction for the speakers of other languages. Louis H. Gray (1939: 12) defines that "language may be said to be any means of expressing emotional or mental concepts by any living being or beings whatsoever and of communicating them to, or receiving them from, other living beings". English Literature is a rich medium not only to reflect the experiences of people from various countries, but also to contribute a deep sense of cultural identity.

Influence of Literature

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Generally, literature kindles and motivates learners' desire to enjoy various genres of literature i.e. poetry, prose, drama, novel and short stories. Majority of language teachers consider the use of literary texts in language teaching as an interesting tool, because literary genres help the learners understand how language functions through the writers' thoughts, feelings and experience. Edward Sapir (1919: 15) states: "it is obvious that language has the power to analyze experience into theoretically dissociable elements and to create the potential intergrading with the actual which enables human beings to transcend their individual experience and to join in a larger common understanding".

Communication

Communication means the transfer of information from one person to another person through language and understanding. Communication is one of the essential conditions of social interaction. Social interaction is impossible without communication because human interaction is essentially communicative interaction. So communication plays a vital role in human life, to build a rapport with others and to make a social as well as professional interaction possible. Therefore, language becomes a powerful medium of communication through the four methods of listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW).

Communicative Competence and Barriers of Communication

According to Hymes (1972: 281), "theory of communicative competence emphasizes what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community". The ability to understand the language of communication and communicative competence are really challenging for the students of Engineering. Canale and Swain (1980: 45) insist upon "four dimensions of communicative competence". They are identified as follows:

	Four Dimensions of Communicative Competence	Reference
1.	Grammatical Competence	refers to the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity of an individual.
2.	Sociolinguistic Competence	refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of

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		participants and the communicative purpose for their interaction.
3.	Discourse Competence	refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text.
4.	Strategic Competence	refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, repair, and redirect communication".

Lack of Interest

One of the most important barriers of communication is lack of interest in the chosen subject. This is because the contents or topics that the students learn in their engineering syllabus are monotonous and are only language based, not literature oriented. But learners are interested in both (language &literary aspects) to enhance their communication skills. That is why Carroli (2002: 113) states that, "there is a need for qualitative studies, focused on learners, to explore the relation among literature, language and students". It is important to note that everything should be seen in the learners' perspective rather than others' views. But, on the contrary, in engineering colleges, to acquire the skills of language, students are forced to concentrate on subjects which are not normally interesting.

Merits of Using Literary Texts to Teach Language Skills

According to Collie and Slater (1990: 3), "there are four main reasons which brought literature into the ESL classroom. They are considered to be valuable authentic materials for cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement". In language classrooms, the non-native speakers are isolated from the context of events and situations which compel students to use second language for their communicative purposes. Using literature in the classroom is the only way to overcome this problem because, in literary works, language creates its own context. The actual situation of the reader makes them become the real characters as he or she looks on the events created by language. These events transcend the artificial classroom into real situations where the language learning takes place naturally.

Use of Literature as a Technique

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The use of literature is a technique for teaching both language and about language areas, such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Literature stands as a model for language learners to become familiar with different forms and conventions, containing real examples of grammatical structures and vocabulary items; the real texts raise awareness of the range of the target language and advance their competence in all language skills. Using literature in language teaching has the advantage of providing cultural information about the target language. Carter and Long (1991: 3) comment: "since literature enables students to understand and appreciate other cultures, societies and ideologies different from their own, it encourages personal growth and intellectual development".

Objectives of the Use of Short Stories to Teach Language Skills

Short stories are found to be the most suitable authentic literary genre to use in the English language teaching classrooms to improve learners' communicative competencies easily and effectively. One of the most prominent reasons is its brevity. Abrams (1970: 158) defines it: "as a narrative that can be read at one sitting of one and a half hour to two hours, and that is limited to 'a certain unique or single effect', to which every detail is subordinate". So the objectives of using short stories are:

•   Short stories are practical

•   Their length is short enough to cover very quickly

•   Theme and plot are not too complicated for the students to understand during listening or reading on their own

•   Variety of choices available according to the students' interest

•   They motivate the readers and promote critical thinking skill

•   Moral, mysterious and/or humorous stories become valuable tools in the attainment of cultural knowledge

•   Short stories are available for all levels from the beginner to advanced learner, as well as for all ages from young learners to adults

Integrating Some Short Stories in the ESL Classroom as a Trial

1.   *A Snake in the Grass* by R.K. Narayan

2.   *Mrs. Pakletide's Tiger* by S. Saki

3.   *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry

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4.   The Model Millionaire by Oscar Wilde.

Experiment

As an experimental study the above said short stories were taught to engineering students in the ESL classroom at regular intervals apart from their syllabus. During these short story classes, the learners got motivated and expressed their desire for improving their communication skills. After some time, the learners were taken to language lab where they were shown some short stories through audio and video forms. After this the learners asked the teachers for the same kind of short stories for the development of their communication skills. The following are the results of the impact of the integration of such short stories in the ESL classroom.

Effective Ways to Develop Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) Skills

Short stories make the task easier for the language educators to teach the four skills at all levels of language proficiency for the students. It provides opportunity to the students to engage themselves in different activities, such as group discussion, character role play, criticism and interpretation of the theme, content, organization, style and so on. To enrich the concept, Murdoch (2002: 9) adds: "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance English language teaching courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency".

Reading and Writing Skills

Reading short stories motivates the students not only to develop their reading skill, but also their imaginative thinking skill. It further improves students' vocabulary by changing words from one form to another form, for example, changing a word from verb to noun, noun to adjective, and verb to adverb. And other learning activities like matching the words with its appropriate meaning, finding synonyms and antonyms for the difficult words from the paragraphs, and analysis of a particular statement improve both reading and writing skills. So these activities cultivate the reader's analytical thinking that leads to an understanding of the language in a better way. Finally, the tertiary level students attain rich benefits from the content of literary texts (short stories). Reading skill provides them an opportunity to speak the language in a more imaginative way and to discuss everyone's perspectives. The focal point of literature enlarges students' vision and moves things along by way of dramatizing the situations in various ways.

In this situation the integration of short stories in the ESL classroom has become a powerful and motivating source for developing writing skills which are very essential for everyone as English is our second official language. Language style serves as a subject matter for the students when they try to interpret or criticize the content, theme, organization or style of short stories. That is the reason for Oster's (1989: 85) affirmation that, "literature helps students

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write more effectively and creatively". So, language educators can instruct students to have some regular writing practices like writing a dialogue between two characters; paraphrase, summarize or give a report on the thematic line of the story and so on.

Listening and Speaking Skills

Short stories are also used to develop listening and speaking skills. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-play, reenactment and discussions are some of the effective learning activities. It provides better opportunity to the students to read aloud in the class while others listen silently. This helps improve their pronunciation and listening skills. During the listening process the language instructors stop the reading and ask the listeners to predict the future event in the story and ask reasons or explanations for their prediction. This activity improves the logical thinking skill of the students. Sage (1987: 43) clearly points out that, "short fiction is a supreme resource for observing not only language but life itself". In short fiction, characters enact all the real and symbolic acts which people carry out in a variety of registers and tones in their daily lives. Therefore the reading of short stories not only mirrors and illuminates human lives but also improves the learners' communicative competences.

Conclusion

Literature plays an important role in English language teaching. Language educators found some of the drawbacks of teaching English language through literature. They are things like inappropriate literary materials, lack of preparation, lack of interest, lack of motivational strategies and lack of training and objectives in the chosen field. To eliminate these drawbacks, Applebee (1974: 150) states that "teachers have to be encouraged to develop customized learning materials on the basis of the particular needs manifested by the class". And then, Custodio and Sutton (1998: 20) also explain: "literature can open horizons of possibility by allowing students to question, interpret, connect and explore ideas and concepts". In sum, literature provides students with an incomparably rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers. If students can gain access to these materials by developing literary competence, then they can effectively internalize the language at a higher level.

So the ESL teachers should select authentic materials on the basis of learners' needs and expectations, proficiency of the learners, interests, age and gender and different levels of the learners. By doing this, the teaching-learning process becomes learner-centered. For this, Hill (1994: 15) points out: "three other basic criteria to be kept in mind before choosing the text: the needs and ability of the students, the linguistic and stylistic level of the text, and the amount of background information required for a true appreciation of the material". In this connection, Rivers (1968: 230) also points out that "students read and enjoy a text if the subject matter of the text is relevant to their life experience and interests". So it has eventually been realized that the careful selection of short stories and their proper induction into ESL classroom teaching could

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definitely improve not only students' communicative competence in their target language, but also buildup their cultural identity which automatically encourages students to excel in all the fields.

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