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Addressing the Unaddressed: Considering Specific Teaching Context in Exploiting Short Stories to Teach Language to EFL Learners

Shuvo Saha, M.A. in ELT

Abstract

All the research works on the significance of literature in ELT (English language teaching) almost unanimously concur to the point that literary texts as authentic source of language input have tremendous potential to aid language teaching. Short story in particular is considered with added value due to its motivating nature which is embedded within. This paper exploits two short stories and designs a series of language tasks to teach the English language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing— to tertiary level students from private universities in EFL setting. The aim is to acquaint EFL instructors with the way short stories can

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

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be exploited as text to design language activities and implement them effectively utilizing all the available facilities of a particular teaching context like that of private universities. The study, moreover, discusses some of the pragmatic challenges of employing literature for language teaching purpose and finally reflects on the scope for further research.

1. Introduction

In twenty-first century's trend of language teaching pedagogy in EFL setting, there has been a constant cry for incorporating authentic materials that considers learners' impulse as opposed to traditional course books, which according to Lau, include many dully written materials neglecting the interests of language learners (2002, p.1). A number of researchers, in this vein, advocate literature to be used as a resource as well as a tool in EFL classroom (see Lau, 2002; Khatib et al., 2011; Yeasmin et al., 2011; Pardede, 2011; Khatib & Rahimi, 2012).

Literature wonderfully renders language learning activity an exclusively human affair by, according to Collie & Slater (1987), offering a bountiful and significantly varied body of written material that deals with enduring human issues. Kramsch (1993, p. 175) maintains that literary texts give students "access to a world of attitudes and values, collective imaginings and historical frames of reference that constitute the memory of a people or speech community", which in turn broadens the latter's horizon of understanding the common human nature. Since literature is dialogic in nature, it provides learners with "opportunities for the dialogic negotiation of meaning" and involves them in the dialectic of meaning production (ibid.). Besides, by enabling learners to control and manage their feelings, such as anxiety and nervousness, in difficult situations, for say at the time of taking high stake tests, literature nurtures their 'emotional intelligence' (Ghosn, 2002).

As it comes to teaching language in EFL context, literature potentially offers teachers a wealth of conveniences to capitalize upon. From a linguistic point of view, various grammatical structures and subtle vocabulary items in literary texts raise learners' awareness of the range of the target language (Povey, 1967); in addition, learners get to know the complex structures such

as dangling construction, inversion, subjunctives etc. as they learn language through literature (Khatib et al., 2011). Collie and Slater (1987, p. 4) report, "...in reading literary texts students...gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on". They further add that many genuine features of written language, such as "the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, and the different ways of connecting ideas" are presented at many levels of difficulty in literature (ibid.).

As an authentic source of linguistic input, literature not only provides scope for examination of language but stirs the imagination of students (Ghosn, 2002). With the activation of imagination, as Lau (2002, p. 1) observes, learners learn to interact with the text imaginatively. Besides, literature is a sound resource for developing students' inferring ability since literary texts are rich in multilayered meaning and it requires learners to be actively involved to interpret the covert multiple implications of the text (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). Thus, they learn to read, infer, and think creatively and become more aware of the target language. Furthermore, Maley (1989) suggests that literature deals with universal such concepts as love, hatred, death, nature, and the like that are common to every language, culture, and individual; therefore, when students encounter such concepts in literature while language learning, some way or the other, they form a personal attachment with the corresponding text, thus, with the entire learning process (Khatib & Rahimi, 2012, p. 33).

2. Significance of Short Story in Language Teaching

Amongst various genres of literature that can be employed for the purpose of teaching language, short story receives considerable attention for its length and inner construction. Due to its shortness, short story is feasible enough to be wholly covered in a single class (Collie & Slater, 1991). Hence, for a teacher there remains ample opportunity to introduce more than one story, which would bring with them various ranges of plots and characters, within a couple of classes. This may result in an increased level of motivation on the part of students as they would be exposed to something new in each different class. In addition, according to Collie and Slater

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(1991), with usually one plot and a few characters short stories are not too complicated for students to deal with on their own. Short stories are generally concise yet lucid enough to communicate the single plot with learners effectively and are less likely to disorient the latter by derailing from the track of the text. In fact, the compact nature of short story lets students focus and reflect even more on the text to foster their higher order thinking.

So far as the selection of short story is concerned, Pardede (2011, pp. 18-19) exhorts that the vocabulary and syntactic structure of the story selected must fit the level of learners. Very long sentences run the risk of not being understood by students, consequently to bore and demotivate them to read. The author particularly warns against choosing “short stories with archaic, slang, foreign words, and allusions”. For teaching students below intermediate level, ones that have “sentences imitating the speech of a particular locality or ignorant people or foreigners” ought to be avoided. Above all, to ensure all these, the researcher observes the importance of determining the readability of the text on the part of the teacher before making a selection (ibid.). Beside these, Spack (1985) suggests that a teacher should choose stories that he/she most likes to read and teach; while McKay stresses to consider texts that pertain to students’ life experience and interests in the selection process, since such category of texts instigate learners to read through enjoyment (2001, p. 322).

However, for the purpose of designing student centered language activities, two English short stories are exploited in this study. Anton Chekov’s “The Album” (see appendix 1) is the one that is being selected for teaching listening and speaking, whereas “A Long Walk Home” (see appendix 2) by Jason Bocarro is the other story using which I have planned lessons for teaching reading and writing skills.

3. Motivation for the Study

Over the years researchers have though designed different language activities for the purpose of teaching four English language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—using literature as tool, in those designs there is hardly any reference of specific teaching context addressing which the language tasks should have been devised (e.g. see Lau, 2002; Pardede,

2011). The lesson plans are designed in a generalized manner creating the impression that teaching contexts, such as institutions from public and private sector, in EFL setting are homogenous. However, considering that every EFL milieu denotes distinctively varied teaching contexts even within its own periphery in relation to factors such as class size, level of learners, available time and equipments for teaching, and so forth, this study views the necessity of formulating language tasks that correspond to a certain teaching context.

In its venture, the paper sets private universities in EFL setting as its target teaching context and accordingly exploits short stories to design a set of tasks to teach language to first/second semester students. The lessons are devised taking classes into consideration which might have students from various academic disciplines such as English, Engineering, Business, Pharmacy, and so on. The suggested set of activities for teaching a particular linguistic skill is suitable for a 90 minutes class that contains a limited number of students, for say 25-30. The classroom must have a board (preferably whiteboard) to write on. Presence of technological equipment such as overhead projector (OHP) and multimedia projector are optional. The ideal space of the classroom has to be large enough so that it can accommodate at least 60 people at a time; such spacious room would be essential for executing different pair and group works, in performing which students have to move throughout the class. Additionally, to ensure free movement of students and teacher in the class there has to be arrangement of conference chair for individual student which can easily be moved during group and pair works. This would also provide the teacher with opportunity for monitoring students' activities through moving around the class and amongst the students. Besides these, the classroom needs to have a free flow of air and light to keep the teaching-learning atmosphere fresh, lively, energetic, and thus, active. Even if natural light and air do not have access to the room, those can be supplied artificially through tube lights and air conditioners, which should not be too difficult to be afforded by private universities.

4. Text Exploitation

For the purpose of teaching four language skills, namely, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, the two selected short stories— “The Album” (appendix 1) and “A Long Walk Home” (appendix 2) —are exploited in the following sub sections. The first story is employed for teaching listening and speaking while the second one is for reading and writing. Each of the lessons is planned to be implemented in individual 90 minutes class; that means, four different lessons would be covered in four different classes so that both the teacher and the students get sufficient time to engage with language teaching and learning using the literary text thoroughly. However, all the lessons include a series of student centered language activities that intend to reduce teacher talking time and increase student talking time.

4.1 Listening

The listening lesson, which aims to develop students’ listening ability by exploiting literary text as tool, includes loud chain reading of the story “The Album” (appendix 1) as core listening activity. Pardede (2011, p. 22) believes that the particular listening task is apt and extremely beneficial for developing listening skill (alongside speaking). Importantly, the chain reading is to be followed by one more listening activity, which is listening to peer-presentation. Prior to the listening class the teacher would modify the original story by bringing some factual changes, such as altering the names of characters, the place and timing of particular happening and the like, without affecting any other aspect of the story. In the class, the teacher at the very beginning would let students know that he/she is going to tell them a story that is slightly modified from the story’s actual version in terms of factual information. The teacher would simultaneously instruct students to listen to him/her minutely as they have to remember the teacher’s modified version of the story and compare that with the actual version (which they would get next) to identify the factual differences between the two. After instructing so, the teacher would narrate the modified story and students would listen attentively. As he/she finishes narrating, the teacher would provide students the original text of the story and ask them to do chain reading (which has to be loud enough so that while one reads his/her portion others can listen).

In the chain reading task, student sitting at the extreme left or right corner starts reading a text and stops after reading a certain number of sentences [or paragraphs in case of longer texts], as per the teacher's instruction. Then, the next student takes over right from where the former ends. The second student also reads a certain number of sentences or paragraph[s] accorded by the teacher. Afterwards, the third student begins and reads the next few. Thus, the activity moves ahead and finishes when the reading chain is completed with the last student's reading of the remaining set of sentences or paragraph[s]. However, before students start the activity everyone would be instructed to pay careful attention to others' reading since the teacher might stop a student at any point of reading and ask the next to start from where the former ended; in fact, the teacher can make them alert of the fact that any form of lapse in concentration in listening on the part of a single student would mean the entire reading chain collapse.

After students get to know the actual story through chain reading, the teacher would ask everyone to jot down the factual mismatches between the modified version and the actual version of the story "The Album" (appendix 1) and then to present that individually in front of the whole class. Notably, while the presentation would go on, all students once again have to pay minute attention to every presentation because in the following class they would need to submit a written report on each presenter's findings. In this manner, the repeated exposure to various listening activities, instrumented by short story, would eventually acclimatize learners to the task of listening.

4.2 Speaking

The fundamental objective of the speaking lesson is to make learners communicate on the basis of the short story "The Album" (appendix 1). For the purpose, role play is selected as relevant speaking task and the lesson is designed adopting Richards' concept of talk as interaction—one of the three types of speaking (the remaining two types are talk as transaction and talk as performance) (2008, p. 22). Talk as interaction refers to "what we normally mean by 'conversation' and describes interaction that serves a primarily social function" (ibid.). In this kind of talk the focus is more on the speakers and how they wish to present themselves to each other than on the message. In real life talk as interaction takes place when people meet together

and exchange greetings, recount experiences as they wish to be friendly and want to establish a comfortable zone of interaction with others (Richards, 2008).

At the beginning of the speaking class the teacher would ask students to form groups of five members; thus a class, for say, of 20 students would have four groups in total. After forming groups students would be asked to reform the short story “The Album” in around 15 minutes through discussing in group. At this stage the teacher would also let students know that each group has to act out its reformed version of the story through role play in the later part of the class. Therefore, each group would be suggested to retain the central five characters—Zhmyhov, Kraterov, Olya, Kolya, Mother— and reconstruct the story in such a way that it becomes presentable through role play in approximately 15 minutes. While students do the group discussion, the teacher would visit all the groups to check whether they are on right track or not and would provide necessary guidelines. As the discussion session ends, every group would rehearse its recreated stories inside the classroom for about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, the teacher would strictly monitor the groups to control unwanted noise and chaos produced during rehearsal; he/she would also notice whether all members within each group communicate or not. The teacher would, in fact, carry on such monitoring activity throughout the role play session. However, with the end of the rehearsal session each group would get into the role play activity to act out its reconstructed version of the short story. The teacher can provide feedback to groups, rather than to individuals, regarding the appropriateness of communication. This kind of feedback will save those students, who fail to communicate appropriately, from being demotivated due to direct criticisms. Thus, the role play task, based on the selected short story, would help students speak up and communicate freely.

4.3 Reading

The reading lesson designed here is primarily concerned with building up students’ stock of vocabulary, utilizing the short story “A Long Walk Home” (appendix 2) as resource, because vocabulary is considered to be the most important element within a language (McCarthy, 1990, p. 8). An overwhelming majority of meaning is conveyed lexically, therefore, regardless of how well a student learns grammar or successfully masters the sounds of foreign language,

communication cannot happen in any meaningful way without words to express a wide range of meaning (ibid.).

The reading class would start with the teacher's instruction to students to form pairs as they have to read the short story "A Long Walk Home" in pair. As students pair up, the teacher would provide them with the text and give around 25 minutes to read and discuss in pair the contextual meaning as well as the parts of speech of the words underlined in the story (see appendix 2). While students do the pair work the teacher would mainly invigilate them, but would offer occasional assistance if students pursue. After students finish reading and discussing, the teacher would ask everyone to individually write down the context based meaning of words underlined in the text. This particular activity would solely test students' reading skill since they have to provide the meaning that is pertinent to the story's context. A particular word may have multiple meanings but only the context specific one would be accepted in this case. However, as students finish the task, the teacher would ask them to exchange scripts with their paired partner and would provide the appropriate meanings of words either orally or through OHP/multimedia power point (resting on availability). Students would do peer checking, i.e. checking one another's script, to provide feedback to the partner. Afterwards, the teacher would ask students to write down the words on the board that they still do not understand (this might also include words not underlined in the text). As the unknown words are listed on the board the teacher would give the floor to students for open class discussion. Students who already know the meaning of word[s] on the board can contribute by extrapolating in front of the class. The teacher would intervene only when he/she feels further explanation or clarification is required. Given that there is more time left in the class, the teacher can ask students to individually fill up the word form chart below, which he/she would provide them in the form of a worksheet.

Feedback can be similarly provided through peer checking which would be followed by an open class discussion.

Complete the word form chart below. Remember that some words do not have all forms. The first word is done for you.

Verb	Adverb	Noun	Adjective
—	Patiently	Patience	Patient
		Immersed	
Apologize			
	Feebly		
Confess			
		Tardiness	
	Intently		
Contemplate			
		Protest	
Plead			
Ignore			
		Distressing	

Both the reading tasks above would help learners learn more vocabulary along with the category of parts of speech they belong to; and in this way the short story “A Long Walk Home” would aid students’ reading skill.

4.4 Writing

The goal of the very writing lesson is to help students practice creative writing by letting them associate their relevant life experience with the short story “A Long Walk Home” (appendix 2). The activity is designed in accordance with Carter and Long’s (1991) Personal growth model that bridges learners’ personal experience[s] with literary texts to engage them in language learning (ibid.). However, so far as beginning the writing is concerned, Khan (2012, p. 58) suggests that one should start practicing writing identifying his/her audience first, as it helps the writer with decisions about the tone, the choice of language, and the structure of writing. In the writing class, before learners step into actual writing, the teacher at the very beginning would ask students to form pair with the partner they paired up in the reading class. Then, they

would be instructed to think of and share with their partner an experience of their life which is somewhat similar to the story “A Long Walk Home” they encountered in the reading class.

Those who do not have a similar experience can relate any from which they learned something very new. It is important to note that since students have to share their personal information with partners, pairing up with a student already known to some extent (through the pair activity in reading class) should help in sharing more freely; this might consequent in a rich piece of writing full of varied insights and perspectives. Nonetheless, after discussing for about 15 minutes in pair, each student would be asked to consider his/her partner as the audience for whom he/she has to write down the life experience, reminded and discussed a while earlier, in the form of a narrative account which has to be followed by revision. The writing style has to be creative and students would be instructed to follow the short story “A Long Walk Home” (appendix 1) as a sample of creative writing. Students would write individually for about 50 to 60 minutes while the teacher would monitor each of them. As students complete writing and revising, they would be asked to exchange scripts with their partner for having and providing peer feedback. Importantly, the teacher would let students know that in doing peer evaluation more attention ought to be paid to content than to other aspect of writing such as grammar, since creative writing does not generally demand the grammatical accuracy as much as academic writing does.

Afterwards, if some extra time remains in the class, the teacher can provide students the following open ended questions from the story “A Long Walk Home” to answer in 100-130 words. In this case too, feedback can be provided through peer evaluation.

Think about the following questions and answer in not more than 100-130 words. Do not attempt to look for answers from the text as they do not exist directly.

1. Do you think Jackson did the right thing hiding his movie watching fact from his father? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What could Jackson do alternatively?
3. Why do you think Jackson’s father decided to walk for 18 miles?

4. What might be the reason[s] for Jackson not to tell a lie to his father since the happening?

The two writing activities— open ended question answering and creative writing— based on the particular short story would inevitably require learners to think, create, and write on their own without providing any chance to copy from the text. Most importantly, throughout the writing session the short story would act as a guide to lead student writers forward and consequently nurture their writing talent.

5. Pragmatic limitations of literature as language teaching material

The review of literature in the introductory section and the lesson plan discussed above may give one the impression that literature is a foolproof material that can be incorporated in language teaching without any question. In reality, like any other piece of authentic material, literary texts mark a couple of crucial pragmatic constraints for why, perhaps, despite having so many significant aspects literature is not seen to be used overwhelmingly in language classes. To speak of the first challenge, the vastness of literature can often push a teacher to the terrain of uncertainty in selecting literary text that is appropriate for particular teaching context and particular level of learners. Both the experienced teachers and the novice ones can struggle in this respect because even a systematic search to find out an apt piece of literature, to be used as language teaching material, demands considerable time, patience, and energy on the part of a teacher.

Prior to selecting any textual material for language teaching, it is essential and obligatory for the teacher to read and get idea about its content. The length of literary genres such as novel, drama, fiction, and so forth, which are usually quite long, renders it almost impossible for any teacher to read a number of such texts and select one within a short period. In fact, there are many short stories as well as poems which are lengthy enough to pose similar challenge to a language teacher.

Secondly, literary discourse may be a testament to artistic display of creative language, but that barely prepares language learners for their academic and career causes. Literary texts teach students neither the academic English nor the English required for professional and

business communication. For instance, if a student wants to learn how to write an application or CV, it is really difficult (perhaps impossible) to find a literary piece that can teach him/her the mentioned writing items. Therefore, employment of literature in language teaching and learning would mean the production of learners who are pragmatically incompetent for the competitive academia and job field.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The discussion so far suggests that alike other authentic language teaching materials literature has its own set of potentials and challenges. On the one hand, its ability to weave an individual's personal life, cultural life, and language in the same thread always provides literature a different dimension to prove it exceptional amongst the whole array of authentic materials; on the other hand, the pragmatic constraints of literary texts are something worthy to be concerned about. Therefore, it seems sensible enough to use literature selectively for the purpose of language teaching, instead of grossly rejecting or embracing it. When teachers would feel the necessity of integrating language teaching with various meta-linguistic phenomena of human world, such as social, cultural, political, and experiential, literature can then be incorporated in language pedagogy to exploit all its linguistic and meta-linguistic essence. Concretely speaking, in an entire course of language teaching at best four classes can be allotted to teach four different skills of language through literature, as is done in the particular lesson plan I have designed here using two short stories. The suggested language tasks in this study extract both the language and the experiential phenomena of human life from the two stories to teach language in the specific context of private universities; and I feel this paves the way for further concept based studies to design language lessons using short stories for other teaching contexts such as the public schools, colleges, universities, and the madrasas (the Islamic religion based educational institutions) in EFL setting. In fact, there remains scope for action research as well to check the implementability of language activities like the ones recommended in this paper.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Shuvo Saha, M.A. in ELT

Addressing the Unaddressed: Considering Specific Teaching Context in Exploiting Short Stories to Teach Language to EFL Learners

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Appendix 1
The Album
Anton Chekhov

Kraterov, the titular councillor, stepped forward and, addressing Zhmyhov, said:

"Your Excellency! Moved and touched to the bottom of our hearts by the way you have ruled us during the course of more than ten years, we, your subordinates, on this so memorable day for us, beg your Excellency to accept in token of our respect and profound gratitude this album with our portraits in it, and express our hope that for the duration of your distinguished life, that for long, long years to come, to your dying day you may not abandon us. . . ."

A tear trickled down the wrinkled left cheek of Zhmyhov.

"Gentlemen!" he said in a shaking voice, "I did not expect, I had no idea that you were going to celebrate my modest jubilee. . . . I am touched indeed . . . very much so. . . . I shall not forget this moment to my dying day, and believe me . . . believe me, friends, that no one is so desirous of your welfare as I am . . . and if there has been anything . . . it was for your benefit."

Zhmyhov, the actual civil councilor, kissed the titular councilor Kraterov, who had not expected such an honor, and turned pale with delight. Then the chief made a gesture that signified that he could not speak for emotion, and shed tears as though an expensive album had not been presented to him, but on the contrary, taken from him. . . . Then when he had a little recovered and said a few more words full of feeling and given everyone his hand to shake, he went downstairs amid loud and joyful cheers, got into his carriage and drove off, followed by their blessings. As he sat in his carriage he was aware of a flood of joyous feelings such as he had never known before, and once more he shed tears.

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At home new delights awaited him. There his family, his friends, and acquaintances had prepared him such an ovation that it seemed to him that he really had been of very great service to his country, and that if he had never existed his country would perhaps have been in a very bad way. The jubilee dinner was made up of toasts, speeches, and tears. In short, Zhmyhov had never expected that his merits would be so warmly appreciated.

"Gentlemen!" he said before the dessert, "two hours ago I was recompensed for all the sufferings a man has to undergo who is the servant, so to say, not of routine, not of the letter, but of duty! Through the whole duration of my service I have constantly adhered to the principle;-- the public does not exist for us, but we for the public, and to-day I received the highest reward! My subordinates presented me with an album . . . see! I was touched."

Festive faces bent over the album and began examining it.

"It's a pretty album," said Zhmyhov's daughter Olya, "it must have cost fifty roubles, I do believe. Oh, it's charming! You must give me the album, papa, do you hear? I'll take care of it, it's so pretty."

After dinner Olya carried off the album to her room and shut it up in her table drawer. Next day she took the clerks out of it, flung them on the floor, and put her school friends in their place.

The government uniforms made way for white pelerines. Kolya, his Excellency's little son, picked up the clerks and painted their clothes red. Those who had no moustaches he presented with green moustaches and added brown beards to the beardless. When there was nothing left to paint he cut the little men out of the card-board, pricked their eyes with a pin, and began playing soldiers with them. After cutting out the titular councilor Kraterov, he fixed him on a match-box and carried him in that state to his father's study.

"Papa, a monument, look!"

Zhmyhov burst out laughing, lurched forward, and, looking tenderly at the child, gave him a warm kiss on the cheek.

"There, you rogue, go and show mamma; let mamma look too."

=====

Appendix 2
A Long Walk Home
Jason Bocarro

I grew up in the south of Spain in a little community called Estepona. I was 16 when one morning my father told me I could drive him into a remote village called Mijas, about 18 miles away, on the condition that I take the car in to be serviced at a nearby garage. Having just learned to drive and hardly ever having the opportunity to use the car, I readily accepted. I drove Dad into Mijas and promised to pick him up at 4 p.m., then drove to a nearby garage and dropped off the car. Because I had a few hours to spare, I decided to catch a couple of movies at a theatre near the garage. However, I became so immersed in the films that I completely lost track of time. When the last movie had finished, I looked down at my watch. It was six o'clock. I was two hours late.

I knew Dad would be angry if he found out I'd been watching movies. He'd never let me drive again. I decided to tell him that the car needed some repairs and that they had taken longer than had been expected. I drove up to the place where we had planned to meet and saw Dad waiting patiently on the corner. I apologized for being late and told him that I'd come as quickly as I could, but the car had needed some major repairs. I'll never forget the look he gave me.

"I'm disappointed that you feel you have to lie to me, Jackson."

"What do you mean? I'm telling the truth."

Dad looked at me again. "When you did not show up, I called the garage to ask if there were any problems, and they told me that you had not yet picked up the car. So you see, I know there were no problems with the car." A rush of guilt ran through me as I feebly confessed to my trip to the movie theater and the real reason for my tardiness. Dad listened intently as a sadness passed through him.

"I am angry, not with you but with myself. You see, I realize that I have failed as a father if after all these years you feel that you have to lie to me. I have failed because I have brought up a son who cannot even tell the truth to his own father, I'm going to walk home now and contemplate where I have gone wrong all these years".

"But Dad, its 18 miles to home. It's dark. You can't walk home."

My protests, my apologies and the rest of my utterances were useless. I had let my father down, and I was about to learn one of the most painful lessons of my life. Dad began walking along the dusty roads. I quickly jumped in the car and followed behind, hoping he would relent. I pleaded all the way, telling him how sorry I was, but he simply ignored me, continuing on silently, thoughtfully and painfully. For 18 miles I drove behind him, averaging about five miles per hour. Seeing my father in so much physical and emotional pain was the most distressing and painful experience that I have ever faced. However, it was also the most successful lesson. I have never lied to him since.

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