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## A CRITICAL REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF INCORPORATING LITERARY SHORT STORIES IN THE CURRICULAM FOR IMPROVING LEARNERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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### Abstract:

*Literature is defined as a mirror of life as it reflects culture, ethics, morals and human values of the society. Literature is considered to be the base of any language with which it grows steadily. Human life or existence cannot be differentiated or separated from one another. So, literature has gained such an interconnectivity with human beings. That is why, English language today has evolved as a global or link language throughout the world. And then, the use of effective communication skills helps them reach higher positions, acquire jobs, promote business, and enjoy various forms of entertainments. Even teaching any language skills without literature is a difficult task for teachers. Therefore, effective English language skills are highly needed not only for special purposes but also for understanding scientific and other technical advancements happening around the world. Generally, people consider literature as a separate subject that has nothing to do with language learning. But this paper explores the importance of integrating literary texts (short stories) in the ESL classroom for improving their communication skills. In order to authenticate the above, a group of thirty first year Economics students were chosen. The language lab was used to teach the literary texts. Further, students are motivated to express their views over the conclusion of the authors. So, the present paper aims to analyse how far the students enhance their language, reading and writing skills through short stories like **How Much Land Does a Man Need?** and **The Verger** by Leo Tolstoy and W. Somerset Maugham respectively.*

**Keywords:** Language Learning, effective communication, language Lab, short stories and Group Discussions.

Many educationists and theorists have agreed that the use of Literature or literary texts in the language classes have kindled student's interest which resulted in good communication skills. Because they can relate literature stories to their everyday practical life and experiences. As they are able to correlate the stories with their real-life situations, they could enjoy and learn it in a more creative way. Hence, they not only gain literary

knowledge which is projected in the lessons but also develop human values and morals related to the concept. Group interactions on the particular topics allow students to discuss their personal experiences. Again, the implementations of group discussion and creative assignments bring some remarkable changes in their communication systems.

Generally, literature helps to analyse a wide range of texts. Learners can deepen their understanding of human nature and behaviour. They develop their intelligence as they grapple with the diverse thought process of authors whose lives and circumstances may be different from their own, with their insights and ideas. Very often, students use their imaginative or creative ways and use language to communicate their views of life accordingly. That is why, literature is considered to be an authentic material. In reading literary texts, students cope with the language intended for native speakers, they become familiar with many different situations of communicative functions.

Literature and some literary texts play a vital role in English language teaching for improving students' communicative skills. Language teachers use literature in English teaching practices so that they can broaden students' horizons by imparting knowledge of the classical texts as well as improving students' general cultural awareness. Hence, these texts stimulate their creative and literary imagination and develop their understanding of literature. And then, literature plays an important role in teaching four basic language skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, when using literature in the language classroom, skills should never be taught in isolation but in an integrated way. But the teachers should keep in mind the following points while selecting literary pieces meaningfully for teaching in the language classroom.

- Choose a book or literary text that suits your students' levels and interests.
- Pre-teach the important glossary or vocabulary for discussing literature in the particular text.
- Motivate or activate their prior knowledge related to the teaching context.
- Explain the language skills which they are going to learn through literature.

The use of stories, short stories in particular, has taken a major role for developing learners' communication skills. Because, reading of such stories prepared them to analyse those stories and relate those characters and incidents with their real experiences and instances. For instance, they could relate to their neighbours, relatives or friends and they share even their own personal experiences in the class when the seminar or course work or project work is allotted to them. These two thought-provoking short stories *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* and *The Verger* by Leo Tolstoy and W. Somerset Maugham respectively could motivate students in developing their communication skills.

Actually, the learners' responses to the literary texts (short stories) not only help them in reading and interpreting stories but also help them to write and speak legibly. Further it helps the students to understand that they can use the power of language to influence the world in a positive way. It also ensures that all the students are able to prepare effectively to communicate in their major subjects or disciplines. It increases students' articulation ensuring the capacity of reasoning critically, solving problems and communicating with clear and effective language. It enhances student's commitment for improving their proficiency in academic

English. And then, it promotes students' developing English language or literature focusing on Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) skills, besides being familiar with useful quotations and expressions.

The Russian author Leo Tolstoy's short story *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*(1886) focuses on Pakhom, a poor man who develops an idea that his life would be perfect if only he owned more acres of land. Unfortunately, his obsession eventually consumes him. Because of his greediness for land, he loses everything that actually matters in his life. It is considered a classic anti-materialism tale. Though it is only nine pages long, it deeply explores the themes of greed, poverty and social elevation. And what truly makes a person happy, in turn it becomes a death bell: i.e., an ironic ending. It was cited by authors James Joyce and Ludwig Wittgenstein as one of the best short stories ever written. It is still taught widely today in classes studying Russian literature. This story is about a peasant named Pakhom, who lives a humble existence. As the story opens, he overhears his wife and sister-in-law discussing the merits and demerits of town life versus farm life. He thinks to himself that if he had plenty of land, he would have nothing to fear—not even the devil himself. However, the Satan is in the house watching him and overhears his thoughts without his knowledge. Now the Satan decides that he will accept his challenge and give him everything he wants—but then snatch everything from him. After a while, a landlady in the peasant village decides to sell her estate. There is a frenzy among the peasants of the village to buy her holdings. Pakhom decides to buy it and mobilizes enough money to purchase at least a small parcel of land. He believes that his hard work on the extra land would help him to reap enough extra money to live a more comfortable existence.

However, the extra money causes Pakhom to become very possessive of his land and paranoid that it will be taken away from him. He starts to have conflicts with his neighbours, and some, resenting his success, even threaten to burn his house. The tension makes him decide to move his family to another commune with more land. There, he is able to grow even more crops and build up a small fortune. However, he is forced to grow the crops on rented land, which he resents due to wanting to be self-sufficient. He works hard to buy and sell a lot of fertile land, building up his fortune further. He is soon introduced to the Bashkirs, a local indigenous group, and learns that they are simple people who own a lot of land. He approaches them and negotiates with them to buy a large parcel of their land.

However, the Bashkirs' offer is unusual. They tell him that for one thousand rubles, he can walk around as large an area as he wants, starting at daybreak, and mark his route with a spade. If he returns to his starting point by sunset, he gets all the land he marked. However, if he does not reach his starting point, he has to forego his money and gets nothing. After hearing this, Pakhom is delighted, believing this will be easy for him and thinks the bargain of a lifetime from these simple people. However, the night before his task, he experiences a horrific dream in which he sees himself lying dead on the ground, with the devil laughing over his corpse. The next day, he stays out as late as possible, marking the land until just before the sun sets. As he sees the sun setting, he realizes he is far from the starting point and started running as the Bashkirs wait for him. He arrives at the starting point just as the sun sets, and the Bashkirs congratulate him. Suddenly, exhausted from the run, his heart gives out, and he drops dead right in front of the landowners. The story ends with his servant burying him in a simple grave, six feet long—in the end, all the land he needed.

Hence, the point is that after reading the story, most of the students have expressed their views on the lesson. They also discussed with their peers. And then, by taking this lesson into consideration, the students are asked to come up with the assignments after a week. It is like a project work for them. After a week they have done their project work which is given to them. Interestingly, they have found out the condition of the such greedy people in their surroundings. When they present their real situations were horrible, pathetic conditions which cannot be bearable. One student has mentioned about greedy man. Like this many students have come up with different horrible situations. With these kinds of presentations, students learn moral, sympathy, empathy, humanity and concern. With this kind of activity, it is proved clearly that literary stories with good themes and morals enhance their communication skills in the class. Students not only develop their language but also learn moral values and human values. Furthermore, this activity sharpens students critical thinking. This strategy helped the students to deepen their both language and literature.

The next short story is *The Verger* by W. Somerset Maugham. The major themes are appearance, opportunity, dedication, independence and humility. Taken from his Collected Short Stories, the story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and after reading the story the reader realises that Maugham may be exploring the theme of appearance. Albert Edward doesn't like wearing his new verger's gown for christenings. He prefers to keep it for weddings and funerals. Considering it more appropriate to wear the new gown for these occasions. This may be important as Maugham may be suggesting that appearance is important to Albert Edward. Similarly, the vicar seems to think appearance is important too. Things like being able to read and write set a standard that the vicar believes everybody should attain. This may also be significant as it suggests that the vicar believes that the ability to read and write reflects on the good character of St. Peter's. As Albert Edward can't read or write and the fact that he is not prepared to learn goes against what the vicar thinks is good for St. Peter's. It also doesn't help Albert Edward that he has never been in trouble with the authorities of the church and that he has an impeccable record. As a representative of St. Peter's, the vicar doesn't believe that Albert Edward is good enough. He does not have the skills that the vicar thinks a verger must have.

Maugham may also be exploring the theme of opportunity. Rather than being downcast about the fact that he has lost his job. Albert Edward turns his loss into an opportunity by deciding to set up a tobacconists and newsagents. From defeat Albert Edward manages to grasp victory and eventually owns ten shops. Which in many ways shows the dedication that Albert Edward has with him. It is this same dedication that had previously made him a successful verger. Once focused Albert Edward appears to throw all his energies into whatever effort (verger or shop owner) he is undertaking. It is as though Albert is driven not by profit but by a desire to be the best that he can be. Even if he can't read and write. It may also be a case that Maugham is attempting through Albert Edward's success to ridicule the vicar. Someone who appears to be aloof and disconnected from those around him. What the vicar considers to be important is not necessarily the same for others. Something that is noticeable by the fact that Albert Edward resigns his position from the church.

Though some critics might suggest that being a verger is an important role in the church. That it has an element of prestige. It is not the same as being self-sufficient something that Albert now is with his ten



shops. From being answerable to others (the vicar) Albert Edward has become his own boss. Answerable to nobody but himself. Which is a dramatic change in circumstances for Albert Edward and again it is probably important to remember that Albert Edward achieved everything he has without being able to read or write. If anything, Albert Edward has been an underdog throughout the story. Answerable to others. Forced to resign and still managing to make a success out of his life. The fact that the vicar also gave Albert Edward an ultimatum which Albert Edward decided against following shows that Albert Edward has an independent streak. He does not conform just because he is told to by the vicar. Rather Albert submits his resignation and continues on with the rest of his life.

It may also be significant that Albert Edward does not allow the success he has got to his head. If anything, he remains as humble as he was when he was a verger. Where others might use their success to live a dissolute life. This is not the case with Albert Edward. How humble Albert might actually be is noticeable by his reply to the bank manager when the bank manager wonders how successful Albert could have been if he did know how to read or write. By telling the bank manager that he would be the Verger of St. Peter's, Albert Edward manages to show humility. He has not forgotten where he came from nor does he wish to change his past. It is as though Albert Edward despite having to resign from a position he enjoyed holds no animosity towards anybody (the vicar). Albert Edward is living a satisfied life whereas others may not be as fortunate as Albert Edward. He has shown ingenuity and flexibility in his life. Something that the vicar was unable to do. If anything the vicar lived by a set of rigid rules that Albert Edward did not comply with nor did he wish to comply with. Albert Edward has made a success out of his life and remained humble throughout. Whereas the vicar may have been driven by his own inflated ego.

After reading this story students have given their own interpretations in many ways. They like Albert Edward's character in this story. Some of them have constructive opinion on Edward's character they have got the intention that they should be like Edward who is kind human being. When the same situation is given to them to enact the role of Edward, they have come up with different incidents which show their decision-making skills and language skills. Involving students and allowing them to involve many activities lead them to widen their

knowledge and language skills. This makes students to accomplish the link between self and the world knowledge. Another activity is 'to develop the conversation between The bank manager and Albert. Under this spectrum the development of content, understanding, confidence and making proper sentence structures are improved. Students come up with their ideas and frame their own dialogues.

Hence, students enjoy these kind of literature stories and participate interestingly in activities. They even learn grammar, vocabulary, sentence structures to some extent. Along with this they develop their confidence while narrating. As life skills are more important in one's life, leads to personality development. Through a close interaction with literary or creative works which portray a diverse range of human thought, emotion and experience, learners are able to gain knowledge and understand of the nature of human existence. They also develop insights into and an appreciation of the world and of the society in which they live.

To sum up, developing Communication Skills through Literature focus (short stories) is on individual's current skills ie., ability to perform immediately in their jobs. Effectiveness is defined as the ability of producing a preferred effect. Effective mentoring is needed for development of student learning skills. The literature indicates language skills. Therefore, the study of literature (here short stories) improves creativity, critical thinking, intercultural understanding and thinking skills which are highly valued. Further these benefits include promoting not only LSRW abilities and motivation but also enhancing other communicative skills. Literature can also be used to teach grammar. Therefore, integrating literary short stories genres into L2 classrooms can undoubtedly create a learning environment that will provide comprehensible input for enhancing the learners' communicative skills.

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