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STUDY OF LITERATURE FOR EFFECTIVE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

With the global expansion of industrialisation and market economy across borders and cultures, ably assisted by communication technologies, communication skill for business purposes has acquired a greater importance in educational curriculum today. The post-modern ethos of 'decentring' has also created a new wave of thinking which has given a lot of credibility to the notions of relativist fragmentation to almost all the institutions of 'meaning'. Instead of an integrated approach to the learning of languages, we have reduced the patterns and processes of learning into segmentations and compartmentalisation, with all kinds of new ideas floated around in the name of specialisation. For example, today English language teaching has been segmented into different schools such as communication skills, business skill, functional English, study of literature, so on and so forth. The aim of the paper is to examine the merits of using the experiential approach to literature to teach Business English. The use of literature to teach Business English, in my humble view, will definitely help the students not only in increasing their retention capabilities, but also facilitate process-oriented learning which helps the students in developing interpersonal and inter-cultural skills quite essential in the business context.

KEYWORD

business communication.

INTRODUCTION

The last twenty two years of neo-liberal economics in India have witnessed a huge growth and expansion of the concept of Business English. Today the idea has acquired the status of a major branch in English teaching departments. However there is not much thought going into the area as to what constitutes Business English, its methodology, needs analysis, course planning, assessment and evaluation, and classroom management. Recently there has been a glut of second rate textbooks on the subject of business English trying to reveal the purpose, relevance and need of this kind of learning. The textbooks also focus on the issues of methodology and strategies to be adopted so as to acquire the skills in business communication. According to Hewings and Nickerson two calls have been heard continuously from those involved in training in Business English: the need to "report good practice and share experience", and the need for "more applied linguistic research into the use of English in business in order to inform teaching (v)". This paper tries to examine the first call to share experience.

However there is an urgent need to explore the role and relevance of literature in teaching Business. Linguists like Duangsamorn emphatically extend the argument for the inclusion of literature in curriculum "to improve the students' ability in effective business communication (19)". There are scholars who suggest using literature in the Business English classroom to help students understand other cultures better. There are also experiential studies conducted to claim that teaching of literature helps the students to improve their English proficiency and communicative effectiveness in business writing. But there is no clarity of purpose so far which demonstratively shows how literature can actually be included and used to teach specific business skills such as writing letters, reports, resumes, and giving presentations.

OBJECTIVE

This paper aims to discuss the issue of use of various forms of literature to teach the writing of business correspondence and other business communications. This paper also attempts to examine the benefits of using the experiential approach to literature to teach Business English. The hypothesis of the study is that the teaching of literature helps the students to retain what they learn for the long-term and equip them better to understand and deal with the contexts of the interpersonal and inter-cultural communications.

DISCUSSION

Though term 'literature' has often been defined as the 'most beautiful' and the most 'refined' creative endeavour of human imagination, its role in English language teaching is still under the shadow of doubt. McRae defines literature as "any text, whose imaginative content will stimulate reaction and response in the receiver (vii)". But for the students of business communication, it is not the literary and cultural aspects of literature that is important. It is fundamentally a study of 'language in operation'— how language can be used for different purposes, such as giving information, expressing feelings, and persuading someone; and the different methods by which language operates, such as statement, comparison, understatement, metaphor and irony. The aesthetics becomes important in the sense that the students must get attracted to good literature to seek aesthetic pleasure, and then to experience the creative use of language used in different social and cultural contexts. This approach is based on theories of language acquisition through visualisation process in order to acquire the ability to use. There is no need to teach grammar or the rules of the language separately. The entire process is inductive where learners discover rules for themselves through the visualisation process. Many scholars are of the opinion that it is more useful for the students to discover the rules of the language for themselves, rather than being told what the rules are.

Since the primary purpose is the acquisition of communication skill in Business operations, the material to be included as part of the curriculum is selected to achieve that simple goal alone. As Business English implies the "definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on particular kinds of communication in a specific context" (Ellis and Johnson (3), the materials that is being used today is intended for a core module in business communication, called Practical Business and Information Communication, where the students receive instruction on skills such as letter writing, resume writing and interviewing for jobs, minutes writing and conducting meetings. What is expected by the students is that at the end of this business communication course, they will be equipped with skills to communicate effectively in English at their workplace. Since the pattern of evaluation in our education system happens to be the written examination, the entire focus of the teaching is restricted to letter writing. But this is no communication skill. Communication has to be an expression of one's personality – thoughts, feelings and ideas - in all situations. For a student of business it is also meant to convince others to his/her point of view by effective communication. And for an effective communication the experiential knowledge of divergent inter-personal and inter-cultural contexts is hugely important. This is where the teaching of literature adds immense value to enhance and harness the effective communication skills to be used in business situations.

Reading vast variety of literature definitely helps in not only achieving short term simple linguistic skills and knowledge, but the ability to retain this experiential knowledge and use it in the long-term also. It is through the study of literature that the students can learn about situations and contexts from which words in print derive their meanings. In the process they learn how to use the language to express themselves in a variety of different contexts. Through the study of literature, the students are able to listen to different voices and respond to these voices. These are the voices that a business manager has to encounter. His response has to adequately respond to his assessment of the background, location and psychology of the customer.

There is universal acknowledgement of the hypothesis that language can be learnt only by use. Hence four ways suggested for the learning of any language are reading, writing, speaking and listening. If a student does not use the information or knowledge acquired, it tends to vanish from his memory very quickly. In fact this has been the bane of Indian education system. We give too much importance to the marks scored in the examinations. At the time of examination the

students tend to cram information for a test, and then right after the test, the utility of that information is felt no more. In the absence of any refreshing taking place through experiential mode, the information simply leaks out of their heads. The continuous engagement with literature would mean not only a continuous refreshing of the memory but an extension of that memory through encounters with the new words and structures, meanings and metaphors. To me the inclusion of literature in the teaching of business communication is quite useful and relevant in more than one way. It helps the students in improving their business communication skills through developing sensitivity and empathy. It gives aesthetic pleasure and helps in the refinement of their personality. The study of literature also improves the "capacity" of the students to exploit the knowledge in the long run as the experiential encounters with the fictitious world of literature will continue to fine tune their knowledge of the language at every step.

Today we live in a different kind of reality. The tremendous advances in the field of science and technology have reduced the physical distance between places and persons. The world has become a global village. The world of business thrives on the notions of competition and innovation. Everyone is in a race where the fittest survives. In such an unhealthy environment it becomes essential to develop the interpersonal skills of love, sensitivity and empathy. To me this is the most important function of literature. A student of literature knows how to relate with the wider world. He understands human emotions and feelings better than the others. Nieragden is absolutely right in saying that the language studies need to move on from "teaching linguistic competence" to teaching "interpersonal and inter-cultural competence (3)". The success of every business enterprise today depends on people who are able to properly understand and handle corporate culture, client orientation and customer service. The managers, executives and even the salesmen must have right kind of aptitude and mental skills, in addition to the linguistic skills, to read between the lines in business dealings and communications and to know what people mean by what they say. In so many communications people try to conceal more than what they reveal. It requires a deep understanding of human nature and behaviour in interpersonal relationships to get to the bottom of truth. In business such competence to handle human relationships demand politeness and courteous behaviour. One way to teach interpersonal competence is to use literature. In literature we come across various characters confronting their peculiar situations. The students learn how to read these characters and behaviours, and, from such encounters with these characters of different temperaments and inclinations, they easily differentiate between the real and the unreal, truth and untruth, obvious and immanent, explicit and implicit. It is only literature in which readers often have to go beyond the 'stated' to dig out the truth lying hidden somewhere within the words and structures. Reading literature can help learners to acquire the ability to respond to utterances in which the meaning is not overtly stated but is concealed within the layers of the language. All Shakespearean tragedies reflect some tragic flaws in their protagonists, which ultimately leads to their tragic downfall from position and grace. It is through the readers' association with this wide range of human emotions and experiences that students can have a better insight into human nature and its complexities. It is these complexities and propensities which affect human communication. Through literature, readers are drawn into different worlds of the characters, and learn to put themselves in someone else's shoes and see the world through their eyes. This human touch or understanding can help students to become more effective business people.

Man has a perennial quest to lift the veils of this mysterious nature. He has also got a dim vision of the sane and sacred within himself. But the reality is such that he has to live with his inadequacies and weaknesses without ever getting closer to these unfulfilled fantasies. In literature he finds a kind of catharsis through the display of these distinct romantic and metaphysical notions of 'the beautiful', 'the noble', 'the sane' and 'the sacred'. This acts as a great motivator. One of the reasons for using literature in the language classroom is that literary texts deal with issues and emotions important enough to the reader to make him or her read or write about them. Duff & Maley make a similar observation that "this genuine feel of literary texts is a powerful motivator, especially when allied to the fact that literary texts so often touch on themes to which learners can bring a personal response from their own experience (6)". We can learn something only if we find it interesting or relevant. Literature that is relevant in the social and cultural context can certainly stimulate the students and capture their attention. This kind of contextual literature, though imaginary in nature, enhances the motivation of the student to learn the language. But as far as possible the literature included in the curriculum should be such that the students should be able to relate with it culturally. In addition it should have "plenty of lively, challenging, stimulating activities capable of motivating learners who lack confidence in their ability to use English and who may tend to view ESP as only a requirement rather than in more positive terms (Waters, 11)". In the Indian context where most of the students have a very low-proficiency in language skills, especially in English, and don't have the requisite confidence to write or speak English, literature can be a good way of stimulating their interest through reading and listening modes.

There is another very important reason for the inclusion of literature in the curriculum for the purpose of imparting communication skills to the learners. Here we must make a distinction between what we call competence and capacity. It is not enough to acquire competency, which is nothing but the knowledge of language rules, systems and structures. It is quite essential to have the capability to make use of that competency in a productive fashion. Inclusion and study of literature can definitely help the learners in acquiring the "capacity" to apply their knowledge over time. In setting out learning purposes it is very important to acquire "the ability to create meanings by exploiting the potential inherent in the language for continual modification and change (Widdowson, 8)". As the study of literature develops the skills of thinking and processing, the use of literature can help students go beyond 'acquiring basic knowledge of the language' to 'learning about the language and its working systems. Sadly most of the Business English courses today are just confined to the issue of teaching competence or knowledge. That is probably one of the reasons why our techno-graduates don't find any employment in the market today. They may be competent enough to use certain phrases or sentences in specific situations. But they don't have the adequate ability to exploit that knowledge to tackle situations and problems which vary from day-to-day in the business context. Through literature, students do not just learn a set of rules and moves to write a certain genre of letters, but they learn to discern different meanings and deal with every situation with effective communication ability.

However it is sad to see that Shakespeares and Wordsworths, Munshi Prem Chand and Mulak Raj Anands have become totally irrelevant for the students of languages who just want to acquire a functional knowledge of the language to succeed in the world of trade and business. The students of languages just have a short-term view of things. The standard textbook materials in business communications appear to have better hold on their mind sets than the experiential mode of language learning through the study of literature. May be one short term target for all Indian students to be achieved is a good score or good grade in the examination. But if they tune in to the rich world of literature, they will achieve 'capacity' to exploit knowledge over the long-term. However, all the methods and methodologies tried so far for the acquisition of communication skills for functional purposes have only been exploratory so far. In my view an integrated approach in teaching business communications is more useful and relevant and worth exploring in the future. It is heartening to see many of our premier institutions such as IITs and IIMs opening up to the interdisciplinary approach of pedagogy and introducing the teaching of literature as a subject for B. tech. students.

CONCLUSION

All the linguists agree that language can only be learnt only by use - reading, writing, speaking and listening. If a student does not use the information or knowledge acquired, it tends to vanish from his memory very quickly. In Indian education system we give too much importance to the marks scored in the examinations. At the time of examination the students tend to cram information for a test, and then right after the test in the absence of any refreshing taking place through experiential mode, the information simply leaks out of their heads. The continuous engagement with literature would mean not only a continuous refreshing of the memory but an extension of that memory through encounters with the new words and structures, meanings and metaphors. To me the inclusion of literature in the teaching of business communication is quite useful and hugely relevant. In a competitive environment it will help the students in improving their business communication skills through developing sensitivity & empathy and interpersonal & intercultural skills. As literature provides aesthetic pleasure to the senses and helps in the refinement of their personality, it will act as a great motivator for the students to tune in and improve their communication skill, even if by default. The study of literature also improves the "capacity" of the students to exploit the knowledge in the long run as the experiential encounters with the fictitious world of literature will continue to fine tune and refresh their knowledge of the language at every step.

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