



The Impact of Reading Motivational Literature on Soft Skill Development – A Study on Ernest Hemingway’s ‘A Farewell to Arms’

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Abstract:

Reading skill is vital for any human being to function, contribute and develop in today’s society. There is strong evidence that reading plays a vital role in improving one’s perception about life, personal achievements, educational outcomes etc. Educational researchers have found a correlation between reading and personality development. Reading habit helps readers nourish and stimulate their minds and keep mental faculties sharp and intact. It builds empathy and improves the well-being of the mind. According to recent research, people who read regularly are on an average happier and more satisfied in life. Reading inspirational literature enables readers to explore new ideas and complex emotions, and it also produces a kind of reality simulation that runs on the minds of readers just as a computer simulation. A classical novel by Ernest Hemingway is used for the present study to prove that reading habit will inculcate soft skills in students at tertiary level. Graduates of today need to meet the requirements of the corporate world and sustain in their career. So, in order to improve their expertise to face the job market and also to enhance their personal skills, inculcating soft skills in them is the foremost objective of modern curriculum. This can be achieved through regular reading of inspirational literature.

Keywords: Reading, soft skills, inspirational literature, students, courage.

DOI Number: 10.48047/NQ.2022.20.20.NQ109077

NeuroQuantology2022;20(20): 763-772



Introduction

Effective reading is the most important avenue of productive learning. Of all the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing - reading has the highest degree of utility since a large amount of learning takes place through reading. The ability to read well constitutes one of the most valuable skills a human being can acquire. It is an essential tool in all academic advancements. Reading is an indispensable skill for academic success, acquiring knowledge and advancing one's social and economic status. The demand on students to read, comprehend and evaluate complex information has never been greater before than in the present.

Several attempts have been made to define reading which is essentially a thought process. According to Shaw, reading is thinking with the author and absorbing his ideas. Urquhart & Weir (1998) say that reading is the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print. Koda says that reading is converting print into language and then to the message intended by the author (2007). Artley (1961) looks at reading as the art of reconstructing from the printed page, the writer's ideas, feelings, moods and sensory impressions. In short, reading is an effective process of conscious learning that influences one's attitudes, morals, beliefs, judgements etc.

Reading is not just one skill but a composite of many specific skills. In order to learn a language, a learner has to be exposed to the language, and reading is the most reliable and efficient means of providing such an exposure. Reading is also necessary for a healthy intellectual growth and it plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve language proficiency (Grabe & Stoller 1997). It influences one's language development and communication skills. Beyond its usefulness as a language-learning device, reading has immense educative value. It has both social and emotional value and makes the readers understand reasons for making moral and ethical choices. Independent reading activity promotes growth and self-reliance. It also develops one's imagination, creativity and general knowledge of the world. The aim of the study is to use reading skill as a tool to develop soft skills of the students at the tertiary level.

The ability to read well not only marks the difference between an educated and uneducated person, it also serves as a very necessary basis for all subjects on which the superstructure of the whole educational system is to be laid. According to Goodman in Carrell *et al.* (1988) reading is defined as a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs. In addition to personal and mental developments, reading is an access to social, economic and civic life says a famous researcher. Thus, regular reading keeps the reader always informed.

According to Bloomfield & Barnhart (1961), reading involves nothing more than the correlation of a sound image with its corresponding visual image. Reading processes range from the simplest decoding of words to interpretative



extensions beyond an author's message according to the experiential background of the reader (Ahuja Pramila & Ahuja 1991b). It is a group of skills which involves word recognition skills, vocabulary, reading for total meaning, reading for central thought, comprehending specific factual information, following directions and assimilation.

Guthrie, Benneth & McGough (2007) believe that reading is the act of getting meaning from printed or written words, which is the basis for learning and one of the most important skills in everyday life. According to Carrell (1998), for many students, reading is by far the most important of the four macro skills, particularly in English as a second or a foreign language. Reading an academic text does not simply involve finding information on the text itself. Rather, it is a process of working with the text. When reading an academic text, the reader recreates the meaning of the text, together with the author.

The importance of soft skills is an undeniable fact in this age of information and knowledge. Soft skills are considered as a decisive factor for professionals throughout the world and its acquisition is vital for all the students at the tertiary level to get jobs at present. Good soft skills that help an individual to stand out in a milieu of routine job seekers with average skills and talent are in fact scarce in the highly competitive corporate world. Many employment experts strongly urge job seekers to enhance their soft skills along with their hard skills. Many employers are hesitant to hire technically skilled candidates who display little emotional intelligence in their career for they are unable to work well with others under stressful conditions. They want to select, retain and promote individuals who are dependable, resourceful, ethical and good communicators with willingness to work. Soft skills help in increasing these in the students' employability rate. For engineering and manufacturing sectors, as in any other type of jobs, the recruiters are keenly looking forward to soft skills in its potential employees besides technical skills. Possessing strong soft skills can put one a step ahead in the competition and make a true professional. CEOs and human resource managers are therefore ready to hire workers who demonstrate a high level of soft skills and then train them for the specific jobs available.

One of the best ways to acquire soft skills is reading books on literature especially inspirational literature. Unlike training drives or lecture on soft skills, reading inspirational literature offers cues and invites readers to draw their own inferences. By engaging the reader in drawing inferences about what characters in the stories are feeling, inspirational literature is very much like a conversation and introspection into one's own self.

Learning about the inner states of others through reading inspirational literature will prompt the readers to explore themselves and improve their personalities and, in the process, they become more open and aware of other people's feelings. This helps in enhancing their soft skills. Reading also gives the opportunity of exploring the subjective world of its characters and provides social expertise to the readers. The style and figurative expressions used in any work of



literature put the reader through an emotional experience similar to that of the protagonist. Like dance or music, inspirational literature offers a distinct experience to the reader which is beyond comparison. Hence, reading can be considered one of the best ways to acquire people skills or soft skills.

Selecting a suitable literary text to offer soft skills training to the students at the tertiary level in soft skills is one of the challenges faced by teachers. There are different genres available like prose, poetry, drama, epic, fiction, nonfiction, comedy and tragedy. The students' needs and preferences, their motivation, interests and background should be taken into consideration while selecting a literary work. As Gillian Lazer (1993) remarks, consideration criteria involves cultural background, linguistic proficiency and literary background. Firstly, the teacher should enjoy the text that he/she chooses in order to create curiosity in the minds of the students. During the selection of genre, equal importance must be given to the choice of the texts. Firstly, the theme must create interest in students so that they get motivated by other factors to study the text. This will also improve the readers' appreciation for literary background. Thus, the choice of the text plays a significant role in inculcating soft skills to students at the tertiary level.

Most of the heroes of literature undergo a journey in which they endure obstacles and struggles. This is referred to as the 'Road of Trials' by Campbell (1949) which means,

...having left home, the pathway to and through the adventure now lies ahead for the hero. The die is cast and the future lies in wait. The road may be long, but it is not dull for as long as the hero faces many adventures along the way. Each trial maybe more difficult than the last as the hero grows in confidence and capability.

Several protagonists of literature generally undergo some changes that cause a turn of events, which make a story interesting and deliver a message. Sometimes, a moral weakness is highlighted that causes the fall of the protagonist. For example in William Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet', the protagonist undergoes terrible experiences because of his indecisiveness, which troubles him while murdering his evil uncle. So Hamlet's struggle in dealing with the antagonist forms the plot of the story that creates a great deal of interest among the readers. The great warrior Achilles is one of the most determined heroes of Greek mythology. According to legend, Achilles was extraordinarily strong, courageous and loyal. Homer's epic poem 'The Iliad' depicts the story of his adventures during the last year of the Trojan War. In 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe', by C.S. Lewis, Aslan, a lion and the hero of the story are on a quest to defeat the wicked white witch and save the Narnians from her control and an eternal winter. Thus, the characters in any work of literature will make the reader ponder upon their traits and provide them with a platform to analyse the difficulties in their lives from a positive perspective.

The study advocates the idea that reading will help in personality development and emotional adjustments and also proposes that literature in a language classroom will definitely advance the habit of reading for pleasure. The study is restricted to the analysis of reading



inspirational literature. Inspirational literature refers to a piece of literature which highlights the ways to overcome adversity and reach new levels of understanding of life and fellow human beings. The study analyses the novel 'A Farewell to Arms' of Ernest Hemingway, for it is profound in motivation and improvement in disposition.

Hemingway's writing is among the most recognisable and influential prose of the twentieth century. Direct personal writing which is full of rich imagery has always been Hemingway's goal. Many critics believe that this style is influenced by his days as a cub reporter for the Kansas City Star, where he had to rely on short sentences. Hemingway's writing technique is uncomplicated, with plain grammar and easily accessible language. His hallmark is a clean style that shuns adjectives and uses short, rhythmic sentences that concentrate on action rather than reflection. Nearly fifty years after his death, his distinctive prose is still recognisable for its economy.

Hemingway is an obsessive reviser. He employs a technique he termed as the iceberg theory and keeps his prose direct and unadorned. This theory supports the idea of omitting superfluous and extraneous matters because of which writing becomes more interesting. When he became a writer of short stories, he retained this minimalistic style, focusing on the surface elements without explicitly discussing the underlying themes. Hemingway believes that the true meaning of a piece of writing should not be evident from the surface story; rather, the crux of the story should lie below the surface and should be allowed to shine through. Critics such as Jackson Benson claim that his iceberg theory, also known as the theory of omission, combined with his distinctive clarity of writing, functions as a means to distance himself from the characters he creates.

The heroes of Hemingway suffer from some wound or scar which is not just physical, but psychological as well. The Hemingway hero believes in empirical evidence to test the validity of any truth by observing practical consequences. He is usually a realist and a pragmatist. He believes in the fact that thought is a necessary guide for action and relies on the truth of his own experience. While most authors choose to portray their protagonists as individuals who finally emerge successful even in the face of the worst challenges, Hemingway's heroes are different men. They are crushed and fatigued and are characters who are injured physically, emotionally and spiritually. Often their world is violent and disorderly and it is the spirit and grace which help them handle pressure and eventually emerge as heroes with a difference. They are typically individualists and free-willed. Although they believe in the ideals of courage and honour, they have their own set of morals and principles founded on their beliefs in will-power and resilience.

Hemingway considers nobility, valour and patience in a life of stress, misfortune and pain as the principal ideals of a hero. The hero acts honourably in the midst of what will be a losing battle and in doing so, he finds fulfillment. He measures himself and proves his manhood and worth by the way he handles the difficult situations that life throws at him. The phrase 'grace under pressure' is often



used to describe the conduct of Hemingway's hero. In the end, the hero will lose because he is mortal, but the true measure lies in the way in which he faces his end. When the world knocks him down, the Hemingway hero always endures and never loses his integrity.

Though Hemingway has written several decades ago, the characteristics of his heroes still remain qualities that one hopes to possess even today. It is for these reasons that college students should look to those heroes as models to live their lives and display 'grace under pressure.' As students cope with academic, extracurricular and social affairs, they often find themselves pressed for time. Hence, reading literary texts with inspiring characters that embody certain traits will help the young readers to alter their depressing views on life. Understanding the value of soft skills at workplace, this study examines the prevalence of soft skills in Ernest Hemingway's 'A Farewell to Arms', the classical novel. The protagonist of this novel exhibits extraordinary courage which is very vital for the present generation.

Webster's New World Dictionary describes courage as an attitude of facing and dealing with anything recognised as dangerous and difficult or painful, instead of withdrawing from it. Courage is a universally admired virtue, and courageous individuals in all cultures have survived across time and have become the heroes of subsequent generations. Humans have always been attracted by tales of courage, bravery and heroism from time immemorial. Courage is a behavioural trait which allows people to overcome their inhibitions, inner fears and gives strength to do what they feel is right, irrespective of any form of hostile response. It also imbues in an individual a sense of self-belief that can make him/her scale mountains or do unbelievable things. As C. S. Lewis observes, courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point (Fitzhenry 1993). Also known as bravery, fortitude, willpower and resilience, courage has always been associated with heroes and successful personalities.

Bravery is an important aspect of both literature and movies because it keeps the audience's attention. Both books and movies based on themes of bravery are likely to be more successful than works of art lacking this element. Bravery encourages the readers or audience to strive to be more like the characters portrayed in books and movies. The ability to be courageous is often misconceived with the notion of being fearless. Being courageous does not mean not fearing adversity. It indicates the strength of will to overcome any fear that one has.

Human history has witnessed several acts of courage in the past. Some of them are Martin Luther King's standing up for equal rights, Anne Frank and her family's secret living to hide from the Nazi troupe, people who fought for the freedom of their motherland, people working for peace with global movements such as UNICEF, Red Cross, Peace Corps and most importantly military personnel and their family members defending the peace of the country.



Set mostly in Italy during World War I, 'A Farewell to Arms' portrays the horrors of war and gives a human face to those involved in it. There are themes of war and love, masculinity and femininity, and courage and fear. The characters work incessantly to hold on to their hopes for happiness while doing right to their fellow human beings in arms. Ernest Hemingway's description of the war is precise and historically accurate.

Being intensely human, his characters contain a variety of views and counterviews. Lieutenant Frederic Henry is the first-person narrator of the novel. He describes all the events according to his own perception and memories. The story never drifts from his vantage point. Every scene in the novel, including the panoramic scenes of war and the afflicted Italian countryside, are described through Henry's eyes. He meets Catherine Barkley, one of the newly arrived British nurses who have come to set up a British hospital unit. Henry likes Catherine, whom he visits as often as he can between ambulance trips to evacuate the wounded.

Henry shows bravery by freely joining the Italian army, risking his life for some ambulance drivers and swimming to freedom and being shot at the whole way. Henry has many different personality traits that are shown in different parts of the novel. He is a man who engages in life, rather than observes it as a bystander. He is a man of self-control even in the face of overwhelming adversity and never demonstrates self-pity. Being very competent and professional in his work, he is a man of action possessing great personal integrity. Though an American, he joins the Italian army and exhibits courage. A man of duty, he does not show much emotion throughout the novel. He neither feels strongly about the cause of the war nor cares about the glory.

Henry is a calm, composed and selfless man who exercises grace under pressure when he is injured and is forced to shoot a deserting engineering officer. He makes his separate peace as any Hemingway hero and decides that he no longer has any obligation to the army. He exhibits courage when he helps the injured men come from the front. The comradeship that the other men have is also made so by the amount of courage Henry shows. His individual suffering is evident when he beholds the death of Catherine and his child. Throughout the novel, he faces a tormenting conflict within himself and external forces that pull him in the opposite directions.

Henry is not a hero in the conventional sense of the term. He does not attach importance to values such as duty, honor, glory, and courage and he simply goes where his assistance is needed. Even with his excruciating injury, Frederic helps the wounded and receives medical attention only after the others are treated. "Henry is a man who thinks about others and this is shown when he says, there are much worse wounded than me" (Hemingway 1957). Henry is not a kind of man who prefers death to dishonor. He saves his life, facing the shame of having deserted the army. He turns his back to the war, mainly because he feels that it did not concern



him. He disagrees with war and considers it too chaotic. It is immoral for him to rationalise the causes of war. He makes a separate peace for himself but is not totally convinced of it. He feels like a truant schoolboy. However, during the war, he displays his capacity to think on his own and make instant decisions.

Henry demonstrates his brave character once again in chapter nine. In Paula, Henry is installed in a roadside trench. When some of the men feel hungry, Henry volunteers to go and fetch some cold macaroni from the other side of the trench. The major advises him against it and says, "You better wait until the shelling is over." Henry replies, "They want to eat" (Hemingway 1957). As Henry and the others come back to the dugout, shelling begins and bombs burst around them. Then, the blast furnace door swings open and Henry is badly injured. This incident shows his selfless courage and bravery. He does not have to do it, yet he goes and gets the food risking his life for others which is a true sign of bravery.

Henry shows courage again in one of the last chapters. In the morning, after a night of sleeping in a barn, Henry and Piani get reunited with a group of soldiers. Suddenly, two men from the battle police seize hold of Henry. Piani is led away, questioned, and then shot to death. Henry does not panic, when he sees Passini die. He thinks quickly and senses an opportunity to escape. He dives into the water and starts to swim away. As Henry swims away, he hears shots behind him. He presses on and the sound of gunshots fades away. Knowing that he will be shot at, Henry escapes because of his courage.

Henry's ideals and morals change during the novel and he begins to question the legal and immoral theories of war since he does not feel as a part of the war. He feels isolated from it. He declares an individual peace and decides to make his way back to Catherine. Henry enjoys a period of peace and happiness as he gets reunited with Catherine. They await the birth of their baby. But Catherine dies in childbirth and the baby also dies and Henry is alone. Henry's disillusionment is poignantly revealed in his last tragic note "but after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the lights it wasn't any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue" (Hemingway 1957). At the end of the novel, Henry leaves the hospital saying goodbye to Catherine's lifeless body. Though he walks away in the rain feeling isolated in grief, he has the ability to endure the greatest of all his losses.

When Henry puts aside his involvement in the war, he feels that Catherine is the order and value in his life and that he does not need anything else to give meaning to his life. But in the end, Henry realises that he cannot base his life on another person or thing because, ultimately, they will leave or disappoint him. He is bold enough to realise that the order and values necessary to face the world must come from within him. In short, Henry exemplifies all the traits of a courageous hero. Thus, 'A Farewell to Arms' shows Henry's bravery that he exhibits throughout the novel.

The works of Ernest Hemingway appreciate many interpersonal skills through their characters. A careful analysis of the characters and the ways in which



they confront challenges in different situations and solve the problems help the readers understand the importance of soft skills better. The select novel by Ernest Hemingway is about handling the challenges of real life situations. When students observe different characters and the situations in which they exhibit their talent, they will be motivated to become courageous like Henry and other characters in their real lives too. They will also build up their behavioural attitude so as to be on par with the qualities of the heroes.

Literature, which is a mirror of human lives, can be used in classrooms to introduce and enhance the students' knowledge of soft skills. Since it distinguishes itself from other types of academic discourse, literature urges the reader to adopt an interactive approach to acquire soft skills or people skills. Hence, reading motivational literature that emphasises on the virtues of possessing soft skills will really bring a change in the attitude of the readers leading to a positive and permanent transformation in them.

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