



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E41

**Adapted and modified by
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1. How I Taught My Grandmother to Read

By Sudha Murty

When I was a girl of about twelve, I used to stay in a village in north Karnataka with my grandparents. Those days, the transport system was not very good, so we used to get the morning paper only in the afternoon. The weekly magazine used to come one day late. All of us would wait eagerly for the bus, which used to come with the papers, weekly magazines and the post.

At that time, Triveni was a very popular writer in the Kannada language. She was a wonderful writer. Her style was easy to read and very convincing. Her stories usually dealt with complex psychological problems in the lives of ordinary people and were always very interesting. Unfortunately for Kannada literature, she died very young. Even now, after forty years, people continue to appreciate her novels.

One of her novels, called *Kashi Yatre*, was appearing as a serial in the Kannada weekly *Karmaveera* then. It is the story of an old lady and her ardent desire to go to Kashi or Varanasi. Most Hindus believe that going to Kashi and worshipping Lord Vishweshvara is the ultimate *punya*. This old lady also believed in this, and her struggle to go there was described in that novel. In the story there was also a young orphan girl who falls in love but there was no money for the wedding. In the end, the old lady gives away all her savings without going to Kashi. She says, 'The happiness of this orphan girl is more important than worshipping Lord Vishweshwara at Kashi.'

My grandmother, Krishtakka, never went to school so she could not read. Every Wednesday the magazine would come and I would read the next episode of this story to her. During that time she would forget all her work and listen with the greatest concentration. Later, she could repeat the entire text by heart. My grandmother too never went to Kashi, and she identified herself with the novel's protagonist. So more than anybody else she was the one most interested in knowing what happened next in the story and used to insist that I read the serial out to her.

After hearing what happened next in *Kashi Yatre*, she would join her friends at the temple courtyard where we children would also gather to play hide and seek. She would discuss the latest episode with her friends. At that time, I never understood why there was so much of debate about the story.

Once I went for a wedding with my cousins to the neighbouring village. In those days, a wedding was a great event. We children enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. We would eat and play endlessly, savouring the freedom because all the elders were busy. I went for a couple of days but ended up staying there for a week.

When I came back to my village, I saw my grandmother in tears. I was surprised, for I had never seen her cry even in the most difficult situations. What had happened? I was worried.

‘Avva, is everything all right? Are you ok?’

I used to call her Avva, which means mother in the Kannada spoken in north Karnataka.

She nodded but did not reply. I did not understand and forgot about it. In the night, after dinner, we were sleeping in the open terrace of the house. It was a summer night and there was a full moon. Avva came and sat next to me. Her affectionate hands touched my forehead. I realized she wanted to speak. I asked her, ‘What is the matter?’

‘When I was a young girl I lost my mother. There was nobody to look after and guide me. My father was a busy man and got married again. In those days people never considered education essential for girls, so I never went to school. I got married very young and had children. I became very busy. Later I had grandchildren and always felt so much happiness in cooking and feeding all of you. At times I used to regret not going to school, so I made sure that my children and grandchildren studied well ...’

I could not understand why my sixty-two-year-old grandmother was telling me, a twelve-year-old, and the story of her life in the middle of the night. But I knew I loved her immensely and there had to be some reason why she was talking to me. I looked at her face. It was unhappy and her eyes were filled with tears. She was a good-looking lady who was usually always smiling. Even today I cannot forget the worried expression on her face. I leaned forward and held her hand.

‘Avva, don’t cry. What is the matter? Can I help you in any way?’

'Yes, I need your help. You know when you were away, *Karmaveera* came as usual. I opened the magazine. I saw the picture that accompanies the story of *Kashi Yatre* and I could not understand anything that was written. Many times I rubbed my hands over the pages wishing they could understand what was written. But I knew it was not possible. If only I was educated enough. I waited eagerly for you to return. I felt you would come early and read for me. I even thought of going to the village and asking you to read for me. I could have asked somebody in this village but I was too embarrassed to do so. I felt so very dependent and helpless. We are well-off, but what use is money when I cannot be independent?'

I did not know what to answer. Avva continued.

'I have decided I want to learn the Kannada alphabets from tomorrow onwards. I will work very hard. I will keep Saraswati Pooja day during Dassara as the deadline. That day I should be able to read a novel on my own. I want to be independent.'

I saw the determination on her face. Yet I laughed at her.

'Avva, at this age of sixty-two you want to learn alphabets? All your hair are grey, your hands are wrinkled, you wear spectacles and you work so much in the kitchen...'

Childishly I made fun of the old lady. But she just smiled.

'For a good cause if you are determined, you can overcome any obstacle. I will work harder than anybody but I will do it. For learning there is no age bar.'

The next day onwards I started my tuition. Avva was a wonderful student. The amount of homework she did was amazing. She would read, repeat, write and recite. I was her only teacher and she was my first student. Little did I know then that one day I would become a teacher in Computer Science and teach hundreds of students.

The Dassara festival came as usual. Secretly I bought *Kashi Yatre* which had been published as a novel by that time. My grandmother called me to the puja place and made me sit down on a stool. She gave me a gift of a frock material. Then she did something unusual. She bent down and touched my feet. I was surprised and taken aback. Elders never touch the feet of youngsters. We have always touched the feet of God, elders and teachers. We consider that as a mark of respect. It is a great tradition but today the reverse had happened. It was not correct.

She said, 'I am touching the feet of a teacher, not my granddaughter; a teacher who taught me so well, with so much of affection that I can read any novel confidently in such a short period. Now I am independent. It is my duty to respect a teacher. Is it not written in our scriptures that a teacher should be respected, irrespective of the gender and age?'

I did return namaskara to her by touching her feet and gave my gift to my first student. She opened it and read immediately the title *Kashi Yatre* by Triveni and the publisher's name.

I knew then that my student had passed with flying colours.

2. Books for 'At Least One Library'

I come from a middle-class teacher's family. In my family, as with many other families of teachers, books and knowledge were considered to be more important than money.

In our village, I still remember the way people respected my grandfather. He was certainly not the richest man. He used to sit in front of our house, on a mat below a shady banyan tree. He always held a book in his hand. In the evening people would come to him for his advice. Even the richest man, when passing by, would greet him respectfully. I asked him once.

'Why should the teacher be respected?'

He smiled and told me a story. 'It seems, some friends of Arjuna, the mighty warrior in Mahabharata, asked him why he gave so much of respect to his teacher Dronacharya. Drona was old, not as rich as Arjuna, and never ruled any kingdom. But Arjuna would always sit at his feet respectfully. When asked why, it seems Arjuna replied, "In this life everything perishes over a period of time. Whether it be diamond, beauty, gold or even land. Only one thing withstands this destruction — it is knowledge. The more you give the more you get." A teacher gives knowledge to students and I consider them the richest people. That is the reason a teacher is respected; not for his riches but because he is the source of knowledge.'

As a child, the first expedition I ever made outside my home was to the village library building with my grandfather. The library was situated in a small two-storied structure. There was a shop on the ground floor and on the first floor was the library. A big banyan tree stood next to the building. There was a cement platform under it. In Kannada we call it katte. In the evening, all the elders of the village would sit here. My grandfather was one of them. I would accompany him and he would go and sit on the platform after dropping me at the first floor.

It was the first of the many libraries I was to enter. There were cupboards with glass panes so that one could read the titles of the books easily. Newspapers and weeklies were piled up neatly. Tables and chairs were laid for people to sit and read. There was absolute silence. I started reading children's books there and used to be absorbed in them until my grandfather would call me to go home.

Years passed and I became a girl of twelve years. By that time, I had finished reading almost all the books in that little village library. At times I used to feel bored going to the library as there were not many new books. But still I accompanied my old grandfather to the banyan tree.

One such evening, we were coming back after our outing. I was feeling particularly bored with the library that day. It was dark and the streetlights were blinking. My grandfather could not see too well so I was leading him by his hand.

Suddenly he asked me, 'I will recite half a poem, will you complete it? This is a well-known poem.'

I said I would try. We often played this game and I had learnt many poems like this. He said, 'If I have wings ...'

I immediately answered without blinking my eyes, 'I will go to the neighbouring village library and read many more books.'

My grandfather stopped in surprise. He said, 'Will you repeat it?'

I repeated, 'I will go to the neighbouring village library and read many more books.'

He laughed and said, 'What an unusual way to complete the poem! Do you know what the original poem is?'

'Yes, I know. 'If I have wings

I will fly in the vast blue sky

I will see beautiful places

I will meet great people

I will search for hidden treasures.'

My grandfather kept quiet. When we reached home he sat down on a mat and called me. He was tired but looked very happy. He took my little hand into his and said, 'Do you know, there was a great man called Andrew Carnegie in USA. He was a billionaire who lived a century back. He willed all his wealth not to his children, but to build library buildings in as many villages as possible. I have not seen America, but it seems any library you see in any village was invariably built using Andrew Carnegie's money.

'I do not know how long I will live, but today I realized how much you love books from the way you completed the poem. Promise me, when you grow up, if you have more money than you need, you will buy books for at least one library.'

It was a cold winter night. I still remember the warmth of his large hand in mine. He was old, and his hands had become hard and wrinkled writing thousands of lines on the blackboard with chalk every day. We were not rich like Carnegie, but certainly my grandfather had the richness of experience and knowledge.

Later in my life, I became well off. I remembered my promise of buying books for a library.

Today, through Infosys Foundation, we have given books to ten thousand such libraries.

3. Abdul Kalam



I have been writing columns for a number of newspapers and magazines for a while now. One of them was The Week magazine. Writing columns is not an easy job. One has to keep coming up with interesting anecdotes to write about. Sometimes the incident is so nice you feel like writing more but you have to be careful about the word limit. Sometimes you don't get any ideas at all, though the deadline may be nearing. Only very few gifted people can write regular columns for a long time.

Once I wrote a column for The Week on the role of Information Technology in people's lives. It was called 'IT Divide'. It was based on a true incident that once happened to me.

Soon after the column appeared, one morning I got a call from Delhi. The operator said, 'Shri Abdul Kalam wants to talk to you.'

That time Abdul Kalam was principal scientific secretary to the Government of India. I had never met him in person till then. I had only read about him in the papers and seen him on TV. Of course I started wondering why a person of his stature would want to talk to an ordinary person like me. We had nothing in common. It would be like a meeting between a Himalayan peak and the peak of Unkal Hill, which is in the small town of Hubli in north Karnataka.

When Abdul Kalam came on the line I said, 'Sir, there is a mistake by the operator. Perhaps you want to speak to my husband, Narayana Murthy?' I knew Murthy knew Mr. Kalam. From the other end a soft, affectionate voice replied, 'Vanakkam, there is absolutely no mistake. I told the operator to connect to you only.'

I was thrilled.

'Sir, you don't know me but I know a lot about you. I have read about your life in the book Wings of Fire.'

'But I too know about you by reading your columns. I read Ananda Vikatan regularly where you talk about your dreams and your struggles. Today when I read 'IT Divide' in The Week, I laughed and laughed. You have written on a tough topic in such a humorous way! I called my colleagues in the office and told them to read the column. Normally whenever your columns appear, I read the last paragraph first because it contains the gist. Then I read the remaining portion as and when I get time.'

That was the best compliment I had ever received. When I write, I always think of the end first and then the beginning. Kalam seemed to have guessed that in no time.

I had heard from many people that he is extremely simple, wears only white and blue shirts and slippers. Soon I got to know that this was not an exaggeration. After our talk on the phone I met him several times. Till today, the more I meet him, the more I am convinced about the essential simplicity of the man. Any interaction with him is a joy and I always look forward to that.

I met him for the first time in Bangalore. He sent me word that he wanted to see me though he had a packed schedule. I was waiting for him in a room when he came in, looking cool in spite of a long tough day. For a while we talked about literature and human qualities. He asked me in chaste Tamil, 'How come you know such good Tamil?'

'No sir,' I replied, 'I can't speak Tamil whereas I can understand. My translator, Mr. Arokia Velu is an excellent translator. The credit for what appears in Ananda Vikatan should go to him.'

As we chatted, a man without a prior appointment wanted to enter. Kalam's security personnel were reluctant to let him enter. Finally Mr. Kalam said, 'Please allow him. It does not matter. He might have come from a long distance.'

A middle-aged man entered the room along with a photographer. He was holding a huge album and a bag. He told Kalam, 'Sir, I own this institution,' and kept the album in front of him. 'Please come for our prize distribution day. It will be a great honour for all of us.'

Kalam looked at a few pages of the album and said, 'I am short of time so I will not be able to make it. May God bless the children.'

Then the man requested for a photograph with Kalam, to which he agreed immediately. The gentleman took a pink-coloured shawl from his bag and told the photographer to take his photo while he was laying the shawl on Kalam's shoulder.

The photograph was duly taken and Kalam thanked him and continued talking to me. But my attention was still on the man. I noticed that he took back the shawl and walked out of the room. I could not control my anger.

‘Sir, he has taken the shawl which he presented to you.’

Kalam smiled at me and said, ‘It does not matter. I don’t need any one of them. Probably he needs it.’

Each time I meet him, I am amazed at his straightforward behaviour and his secular outlook. He has a compassionate heart which particularly loves all children.

After that meeting, whenever I was in Chennai, I would see him in his chamber in Anna University where he was teaching. We would talk about many issues, the main one being about education, particularly in the rural areas. He is extremely grateful to his teachers and holds them in the highest respect.

Once I was sharing my experiences in Chandipur, Orissa and a lesson I learnt from a young fisherboy called Javed. He was a poor schoolboy who helped his mother sell red crabs. For an entire day’s work he received only Rs 5. Yet he was happy and enthusiastic. When I asked him how he could always remain so optimistic, he said, ‘It is better to be worn out than to be rusted.’

As soon as I told this story to him, Kalam wrote Javed’s words down on a piece of paper and exclaimed what a great piece of advice it was. He told me that he likes Orissa immensely, as he had spent many years in that state doing missile tests.

‘If you are doing something in Orissa I will definitely come. I know you work there and that state is very dear to your heart too.’

Once, I decided to visit Rameshwaram, along with a group of friends. When Kalam got to know, he was very eager to go with us as it is his birth place. He said he would join us in Madurai railway station. He had made all the arrangements when his nomination for the post of President of India was announced. He told me, ‘We will keep the plan open for Rameshwaram.’

By this time I was sure he was going to be the President of India irrespective of the election. We could not ask him to join us as it could be major security problem for him. Sadly I had to tell him, ‘No sir, please do not come. We will go on our own.’

By the time we returned from the trip, he had, as I had predicted, been elected the President. He invited me to his swearing-in ceremony in the central hall of Parliament. What I saw when I stepped into the hall amazed me. It was filled with children, teachers, his family members, odd people like me and Father George, who used to be my student in Bangalore and then was doing his research under Kalam in Anna University.

It was a most unusual oath-taking ceremony. Everyone seemed to be close to Kalam. Normally such ceremonies are attended by industrialists, politicians and other VIPs. But here there were students, teachers, scientists, ordinary middle-class people and friends of Kalam. I saw Mrinalini Sarabhai, whose husband the late Dr Vikram Sarabhai was also a great scientist and knew Kalam well. Her sister, Captain Laxmi had contested against Kalam for the post of President. She too was present in the audience.

I came away from the function feeling deeply moved by the love I saw everyone showering on Kalam. After a few months, I asked my son, who is a teenager, to meet Kalam.

My son said, 'Amma, he is the President of our country. He is a learned and well respected scientist.

He is a very busy man. What will he talk about to a person like me?'

'Child, please understand. I knew him before he became the President and I have met him after he became President. There is absolutely no change. He loves talking to people of your age. That is his mission. He interacts with children through email and chat. That is the reason I want you to meet him. Learn from him those qualities which you will never learn in any university.'

Somehow my son was not very convinced. 'He is too big a man for me,' he muttered.

Nevertheless, he was there when we had dinner with Kalam. For the next two hours they hijacked the entire conversation. Murthy and I could only sit and listen. They discussed the best operating systems for computers, the great Tamil saint Thiruvalluvar and his teachings, the future of the children of India, teaching methodologies in America, etc. After he left, my son told me, 'Amma, I never felt that I was talking to the President of India. Rather, it was like talking to my grandfather whom I loved so much and lost four years back. Amma, what you said was true and not at all an exaggeration.'

When Kalam went by train on a tour of Bihar, he invited me to go with him along with five other friends. There I saw another face of Kalam. He would work more than all of us. His schedule would start at 6.30 or 7 a.m. and end at 10.30 or 11 p.m. At seventy-one years he was tireless and the most enthusiastic person in the team all of whom were much younger to him.

He would regularly address large groups of students followed by question-answer sessions. He would take individual questions and answer them. Then he would make children recite some of the important lines after him. He reminded me of a loving schoolteacher or a doting grandfather or an excellent friend to these children irrespective of the difference in age.

During Bangalore's IT.Com I watched him taking an internet class for thousand students. He held their complete attention and was excellently prepared.

When we built a 150-bed Paediatric Hospital in Bhubaneshwar, Orissa for poor children, I was very keen that he should come and inaugurate it. I remembered his promise made to me in Chennai that he would come to Orissa if I invited him. But now he was the President of India, and there were many people like me inviting him to similar functions. He was no longer a professor at Anna University whom I could approach on telephone or send an email and convey my message. However, remembering his promise, I sent him an email assuming it may not reach. But within a few days, I got a reply from his secretary saying that he had agreed to inaugurate the hospital. Coincidentally, it was the eve of Buddha Poornima, May 15, 2003. I have heard many stories about Buddha who was born 2,500 years ago. I was fortunate that this great teacher and lover of children could at least inaugurate and appreciate our effort.

4. Grammar Page

do, does and did

The verb **do** is used to talk about actions. The words **do** and **does** are the simple present forms of the verb **do**.

- Use **do** with the pronouns **I, we, you** and **they**, and with **plural nouns** such as 'my parents' and 'Tom and Susan'.
- Use **does** with the pronouns **he, she** and **it**, and with **singular nouns** such as 'my dad' and 'the teacher'.

I always **do** my homework after dinner.

I **do** drawings with colored pencils.

We **do** our shopping at the supermarket.

You **do** magic tricks very well.

They **do** their housework on the weekend.

Mom and Dad **do** the cooking together.

Jim and Alan always **do** well in math tests.

The artist **does** beautiful paintings.

She **does** very interesting work.

He **does** the washing and **she** **does** the cooking.

Julie always **does** her exercises before breakfast.

My friend **Hannah** **does** karate at a local gym.

The **vacuum cleaner** **does** a better job than the broom.

Here is a table to help you remember how to use **do** and **does**.

	singular	plural
first person	I do	we do
second person	you do	you do
third person	he does she does it does	they do they do they do