CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.0 An encounter with Specific Language Impairment in the classroom

The original impetus for the research reported here arose from my concerns as a practising teacher of English as a second language. As a teacher in a private school in Kochi, Kerala, I noticed that some children had great difficulties with reading and spelling English inspite of intact intellectual abilities and the same amount of institutional exposure to English as their peers. My initial response like that of every other teacher was that lack of attentiveness on the part of the child was to blame. However, the children seemed to show remarkable improvement given personalized attention; each child showed a different learning style and seemed to respond best when taught accordingly.

The subsequent identification of three such children as dyslexics prompted me to inquire further into this language disorder. Some preliminary reading led to a study that examined contextual reading in 8 and 12 year olds (Class 3 and Class 7 respectively), with a view to identifying possibly dyslexic subjects (Raman, 1999).

That study (modelled on Blank and Bruskin, 1984) hypothesized that non-content words would be problematic for poor readers, in comparison with content words. (The marking scheme adopted was that of the Gilmore Oral Reading Test, GORT.) After sampling reading in a population of 81 subjects from 3 schools, we
found that non-content words were not as problematic as hypothesized. Rather, and somewhat surprisingly, content words accounted for a large number of errors. Interestingly, we found that the errors in the content words occurred on the bound morphemes, which were considerably more problematic for our subjects in comparison to the (native-speaker) subjects in the Blank and Bruskin study. The errors consisted mainly of omissions, alternate marking and substitutions. We note that this error pattern is in keeping with current research in Specific Language Impairment (SLI) (see below) that suggests that grammatical morphemes are problematic for children with SLI (Ullman and Gopnik, 1999).

Although the study was not designed to diagnose errors on particular grammatical morphemes, our analysis after the event of the opportunities for error, and occurring error patterns revealed that tense markers, plural -s and possessive markers were particularly difficult for our subjects. Very often the past tense morpheme was omitted (Raman, 1999). “Non-content words are only half as difficult for our subjects .... Bound morphemes are twice as difficult for our subjects as for Blank and Bruskin’s subjects” (Raman, 1999: 65-66). Our study identified 36 subjects out of 81 as poor readers. Within this group, 8 subjects were identified as potential dyslexics, since their reading patterns resembled those of dyslexics. This number seemed to be in consonance with the often-cited statistic that around 10% of school-going children may be dyslexic.

Our finding that grammatical or inflectional morphemes were particularly problematic for poor readers of English as a second language led to a shift in our research focus away from mere classroom-based evaluation and remediation to the current research literature in the field. We came abreast of findings such as the following:
inflectional morphemes are difficult for various populations of language learners such as L1 (Brown, 1973), L2 (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982) and children with SLI (Bishop, 1994; Leonard, 1998; Oetting and Rice, 1993; Ullman and Gopnik, 1999) (see Chapter 2, sec. 2.2),

the reading difficulties of dyslexics are predated by problems in spoken language characteristic of SLI (Aram, Ekleman and Nation, 1984; Bishop and Snowling, 2004; Bishop and Adams, 1990; Catts, 1993) (see Chapter 2, sec. 2.1),

children acquiring a second language exhibit difficulties with inflectional morphology that are similar to those shown by children with SLI (Paradis, 2005; Paradis and Crago, 2000) (see Chapter 2, sec. 2.3).

Our present study is thus located within the framework of SLI.

This research reports the findings from tests on inflectional morphology (past tense and plural) in English and Malayalam administered to 17 children between 8 and 9 years of age, who are Malayalam-English bilinguals. Our decision to examine difficulties with inflectional morphemes in L1 as well as L2 (in this case, Malayalam and English respectively), arises out of our being mindful of the danger of overdiagnosing dyslexia in a L2 situation by confounding it with incomplete acquisition of the second language. One contribution of our work (thus) is the construction of tasks in Malayalam to correspond to the inflectional morphology tasks evolved for one set of standard English tests.

Our main hypothesis is that for children learning a second language who are at risk for SLI, difficulty with inflectional morphology will manifest in their L1 as well
as in the L2. For children who are not language impaired in any way, errors may be
seen in their L2 only; because inflectional errors may arise during the process of
acquisition. They will not show any corresponding difficulties in their L1.

The location of the study (in an urban private English-medium school), the
research design, the construction of elicitation tools, and the test population and
administration are described in Chapter 3. Prior to that, Chapter 2 briefly discusses the
relationship between dyslexia and SLI, and gives an overview of the rationale for the
hypotheses generated and the tests employed. It discusses the status of inflectional
morphology in L1, L2 and SLI. Current theories regarding the representation and
acquisition of inflectional morphology and their predictions, with particular reference
to the dual mechanism hypothesis, for regular and irregular morphology are outlined.
The challenges of assessing populations for SLI in a second language context are also
touched upon.

In Chapter 4 the data are analyzed. The results are computed for the group and
for those subjects whom we identify as at risk for SLI. A surprising and somewhat
disturbing finding of our study is that 7 subjects out of 17 appear to have oral
language difficulties in both Malayalam and English tasks. We also find strong
support for the dual mechanism hypothesis with respect to the representation and
acquisition of regular and irregular morphology in English. A final discussion and
summary of our findings and the issues raised is presented in Chapter 5.

We now present a brief discussion of the status of English in India, as a
background to our study.
1.1 English in India

India is a country of many languages. English holds the pride of place in our country. In 35 states and 5 Union Territories, English is one of the principal languages that is a “medium of instruction” in private schools, right from kindergarten onwards: i.e., it is the language used for instruction in all other subjects as well.

The policy of the Indian government (however) has consistently been to provide school education through the mother tongues and the official language(s) of the states or union territories. Therefore, English is also taught as a “subject” in the “regional-medium” schools throughout the country. Tarinayya (quoted in Amritavalli, 2001: 216) expresses this pithily: “India - where every school-going child has to be taught English.”. It was envisaged as being introduced as a second or third language between the 4th and 7th years of schooling depending on the policy of individual states of the Indian republic.

Given the growing importance of English in the context of the globalization of economic opportunities, however, there is an increasing demand for English. This is reflected in education in two ways: English is now being introduced as a “subject” as early as possible, i.e., in Class I or even kindergarten. A 2003 study by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) shows that English is introduced in Class I or III in 26 states or union territories while only 7 states or union territories introduce it as late as Class IV or V (National Focus Group on English - Position paper, 2005: 1). Moreover, it is no longer being sought just as only a “subject” or a foreign language, but also as a medium of instruction. The increasing demand for English-medium education has led to a spurt in the number of private English-medium schools. Many of these schools are “English-medium” only in name; most often instruction and interaction take place in an Indian language. The quality of
instruction may be very poor, as more often than not teachers lack the required competence in English.

The result of this combination of parental aspirations and systemic capacities is that language education in general, and reading instruction in particular, may be extremely poor in our schools. Nag-Arulmani (2000) has documented the poor state of reading instruction in the regional language in regional-medium schools, coining the term "school-induced dyslexia" for reading failure in such schools. 3

As for reading instruction in English, the quality of instruction imparted may be somewhat better because of the relative prestige that English enjoys. However, we note that children learning to read in English in India suffer from a more general handicap. While on the one hand they may not be taught to read in a language or languages that they speak in their homes, on the other hand they may have to learn to read in a language they do not yet know to speak. This situation is a more general post-colonial malaise that has been succinctly described by Warwick Elley:

Children in developing countries face multiple handicaps in learning to read. ... children in most developing countries are expected to become literate in a non-native language or dialect. Whereas the majority of children in (the developed, GR) countries have the luxury of learning to read and write in their mother tongue, those in most African, South American, South Asian and Oceanic schools are struggling to cope with English, … or some other metropolitan language, usually a legacy of earlier colonial masters. This challenge of acquiring literacy in a second language … is true of most developing countries (Elley, 2001: 128).
The problem of assessing dyslexia in an ESL situation may be exacerbated because children may not be fluent readers of their mother tongue either. (This is a finding in our own research, see Chapter 3, sec. 3.4.4.5) But this problem is not unique to India either, as we shall see.

1.2 Assessing dyslexia or SLI in an ESL situation: The challenge

Assessing dyslexia or SLI in an ESL setting is challenging in view of research findings that monolingual children with SLI and second language learners exhibit similar patterns of error (Håkansson and Nettelbladt, 1993; Paradis and Crago, 2000). The challenge then lies in being able to differentiate between the errors made by a typically-developing but slow second-language (L2) learner who is in the process of language acquisition and would eventually catch up with his/her peers, and one who has a language-learning disability and would greatly benefit from intervention. The overlap between the two groups often leads to problems of “mistaken identity” and “missed identity,” now well known hazards in the context of assessment in ESL situations (see Chapter 2, sec. 2.3 for fuller discussion).

In order to avoid the overdiagnosis of dyslexia or SLI due to incomplete acquisition, it becomes necessary to assess a bilingual child in a language that (s)he has already acquired, i.e., the mother tongue. However, assessment in the mother tongue is not without its own attendant problems. With the growth of and demand for English not just as a subject but also as the “medium of instruction,” the quality of reading instruction imparted in the mother tongue may be so poor that children fail to develop fluent reading skills in a language they can speak (as discussed in sec.1.1). Secondly, the lack of availability of standardized testing tools in various Indian languages makes it difficult to test a child in his/her respective mother tongue. Hence,
special educators often use tests in English that are designed and norm-referenced for monolingual English-speaking populations.

In such contexts therefore, it is extremely important to exercise caution while assessing children for dyslexia or SLI. In the next chapter, we discuss the rationale for investigating dyslexia within the paradigm of SLI, and for choosing to examine dyslexia or SLI from the perspective of grammatical morphology.
Notes to Chapter One

1 According to the 1991 census, there are 114 languages and 216 mother tongues, each having a speaker strength of 10,000 and above (Vishwanatham, 2001: 299).

2 The importance of English was highlighted as early as in 1966 in the Kothari Commission report which says

For a successful completion of the first degree course, a student should possess an adequate command of English, be able to express himself with reasonable felicity and ease, understand lectures in it.... Therefore adequate emphasis will have to be laid on its study as a language right from the school stage (quoted in Agnihotri, 2001: 196).

3 As Bishop & Snowling note, “the principal environmental influences linked to children’s success or failure in reading are educational experiences and home environment. Traditional definitions of dyslexia explicitly exclude children whose reading failure is caused by “inadequate opportunity to learn,” but it is not always clear how to interpret this” (Bishop & Snowling, 2000: 868).