CHAPTER 3

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Anna University in Tamil Nadu, South India, is a technical university. The medium of instruction at the university is English. However, the university allows its teachers to lecture in Tamil, the regional language, so as to help students from the vernacular medium schools but English is the chosen language for assessing students.

3.1 A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE ENGLISH COURSE AT ANNA UNIVERSITY

The English course at the University is a four-credit course and it forms an important component in the calculation of a student's cumulative grade point average. The teaching of English is restricted to the first two semesters of the undergraduate courses at the University. The course is a specific purpose one, aimed at helping students of science and technology with the special skills they require in the language. The materials used for teaching were designed by the members of the English department (The ESP course in the university was the outcome of an ODA project with the British Council, Chennai, and Ealing College of Education, England). These materials have been published as two text books one for each semester titled "English for Engineers and Technologists". The materials and tasks in these books are mainly related to the fields of science and technology. For example some of the writing tasks include: instructions, technical reports,
recommendations, process descriptions, definitions and flow charts besides some general tasks such as letters of application and descriptive paragraphs. Each text book consists of four units and each unit is subdivided into four lessons. The first and the fourth lesson are meant specifically for those students with limited proficiency in English. These lessons titled 'Preparation' and 'Follow up' respectively are expected to help these students participate in the general class. The preparation lesson prepares the students for the general class whereas the follow-up lesson checks if they have understood the main lessons and are in a position to do some of the tasks that form part of the main lessons (A unit from the first volume is given in Appendix 2). Since the textbook incorporates lessons which are meant specifically for LEP students, of the four classes that are allotted for English per week the language teachers meet these students separately for two hours.

3.2 ROLE OF ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY

Listed below are some of the tasks that the students of engineering and technology at the university need to do in English. The list below has been divided skills-wise for convenience and was compiled after discussion with a few subject teachers and final year students at the university.

3.2.1 Reading

- To read and understand lecture notes and prescribed texts.

- To be able to refer to the latest books and journals (seminars are given by students from the fifth semester onwards).

- To keep students updated on the latest advancements in the field and also to 'collect' points for assignments and tests.
• To read the books recommended by the subject teachers. Some departments give an exhaustive list of books that students are expected to read during the semester vacation. The teaching in the succeeding semester is begun with the assumption that students have completed the necessary reading.

3.2.2 Listening

• To comprehend classroom lectures. This is perhaps the most important reason for which all students need English.

• To be able to understand guest lectures delivered by specialists in the field.

• To be able to follow conversations in order to participate appropriately in them (as social interaction between peer groups is dependent on this ability).

3.2.3 Speaking

• To present seminars. Every student is expected to make two seminar presentations during the course of a semester. Sometimes these seminar presentations are made part of the internal assessment of a particular subject.

• To present a report of the project work completed in the viva-voce examination. The main focus in the eighth semester is the project. Groups of three to four students work on a project at the undergraduate level; and a single student handles a project at the post graduate level. On completion of the project students present a written report on the work completed. They
are evaluated on the written report as well as on their performance in the viva-voce examination. Both at the undergraduate and at the post graduate level, the supervisor and an external examiner question the student. Unless the student is able to speak clearly and convincingly at the oral examination, he is not likely to be awarded a high grade.

- To excel in placement interviews which take place in the seventh semester. The placement interview consists of two parts: a written test followed by an interview. Students must pass the written test which consists mainly of objective type questions, in order to qualify for the interview. An important component of the oral interview is the group discussion. Though students may clear the written test, unless they are fluent and comfortable in communicating in English at the interview they may not be chosen even though their CGPA (Cumulative Grade Point Average) may be high. In a conversation with Prof. Baluswamy, the placement officer at the university, the researcher asked him on the relation between fluency in English and placement in well-paid and reputed companies. He said that students must have the 'power of convincing their prospective employers through their speaking skills'. He added that there had been occasions when students with a high CGPA had not been selected because of their poor performance at the interviews.

- To interact with peers on an equal footing.
3.2.4 Writing

Students need English to write:

- Tests and end-semester examinations. Clarity in writing is directly related to marks and grades.

- Assignments. Students write a minimum of three to four assignments in a single subject during a semester. The length of these assignments varies according to the predilection of the teacher concerned. Some teachers fix 30-40 pages as the required norm whereas for others 10-15 pages are acceptable. These assignments are marked by the teachers themselves. The criteria used to evaluate these assignments are originality, clarity and relevance. Students who are able to express their comprehension of the subject matter in their own words definitely score higher marks compared to those who copy from reference books.

- Reports on the industrial training programme (As part of the B.E., B.Tech. programme students of all branches undergo industrial training during the semester vacations). After undergoing training they are expected to present a report on the training undergone in approximately 20-25 pages.

- Project reports. This is perhaps the most important writing exercise that both undergraduate and post-graduate engineering and technology students do as part of their course. The project work substitutes for a core course in the eighth semester and therefore it is important for students both in terms of grades and placement.
• Progress reports of 5-6 pages which are submitted to the project supervisor periodically for review and approval of the undertaken work.

• Letters of application.

• Statement of purpose or what is otherwise known as the SOP. This statement is a kind of a vision statement written by students who wish to pursue further studies in colleges and universities in America. In the statement of purpose, students are expected not just to describe their achievements but also clearly spell out their aspirations for the future so far as their field of specialisation is concerned. The SOP is a single page document and students need to have a high degree of fluency in the language to write about themselves and their work clearly and succinctly.

• Seminar papers.

The above list of writing exercises is not exhaustive because subject teachers depending on their requirements add to or delete from the list. The fairly long list of writing tasks proves that proficiency in writing is an essential requirement if students wish to excel in their studies. It is not an exaggeration to state that proficiency in writing in any academic context is a visible sign of academic excellence. The list above justifies the focus of the present study which is to help LEP students develop their writing skills in English.
3.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE ENGLISH COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY

The primary aim of the two semester course is to help students of engineering and technology develop their communication skills in English and also make them aware of the essential difference between EGP and EST in writing and give them practice of the same through technical writing tasks. At the end of the second semester students are expected to be competent in the following skills and sub skills.

3.3.1 Reading

- To be able to read and comprehend technical writing.
- To employ specific reading techniques such as skimming scanning and predicting.

3.3.2 Listening

- To have improved their general listening capacity.
- To understand in the sense of 'to be able to follow' class and specialist lectures.

3.3.3 Speaking

- To participate in group discussions. Students are given practice in group discussions through role plays and simulations.
- To ask and answer questions, seek clarifications, participate in debates.
- To give instructions orally
3.3.4 Writing

To be able to write:

- descriptions, definitions, written instructions, recommendations, and checklists.
- technical reports
- minutes of meetings
- letters of applications
- paragraphs (mostly descriptive and argumentative).

3.4 METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED TO TEACH ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY

The communicative methodology is used to teach English at the university. This methodology has been a phenomenal success with students with average and above average proficiency in English. For students with poor proficiency in the language it has not been a success. LEP students are perhaps not yet ready for the Communicative approach to Language Teaching. The following could be reasons for their lukewarm response to this methodology:

- To LEP students the teacher is a knowledge-giver and therefore they are uncomfortable with the notion of the teacher merely as facilitator. They are more accustomed to the teacher at the centre stage directing class activities rather than see him setting up the task and then withdrawing from the scene.

- To transform over night from passive listeners to active participants in class interaction is a daunting task for these students. Therefore, when put in groups in the general class
they continue to remain passive listeners allowing their more fluent peers to dominate discussions.

- The transition from an L1 teaching context to the English medium is a painful process for these students and a radically different teaching methodology adds to their woes.

CLT has been a boon to second language teachers in India as elsewhere in the world. So far as India is concerned this methodology has been adopted by syllabus designers and language teachers at the tertiary level mostly. Only of late some secondary school boards have adopted and adapted this approach for teaching English to school students. CLT has become popular with language teachers worldwide, primarily because of its commonsensical approach to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. It has allowed itself to be stretched and interpreted in several ways, and more importantly in a way that is suitable to a particular teaching situation. It has liberated the teaching of ESL in India from the stranglehold of the earlier more traditional approaches to the teaching of English. The shift in focus in teaching has been significant. Earlier, the focus of most English courses in both schools and colleges was on the teaching of decontextualised grammar, and lesson-based content to the total neglect of the teaching and learning of the language for its primary purpose - as a tool for communication. This method of teaching has sensitized some, though not all syllabus designers and teachers in the country on the vital need of making English courses (materials, methods and testing) learner-centered and thus learner-friendly.

The main drawback in the practice of CLT in India has been the total neglect of the teaching of grammar. The word 'communicative' has been interpreted in a very literal sense and therefore the focus has been only on fluency at the cost of accuracy. There has been a tendency on the part of
syllabus designers to design syllabuses that revolve around helping students develop their fluency, however faulty it might be. Syllabus designers and language teachers alike at the tertiary level assume that grammar has received sufficient focus at the secondary level and therefore the English course at the tertiary level should help students improve their communication skills. This means that students from L1 medium schools learn some English at the college level which is inadequate and often faulty. This limited proficiency in English does not help these students to do well in their studies nor does it help them secure good jobs later.

3.5 LANGUAGE TESTING PRACTICE AT THE UNIVERSITY

The current language testing practice at the university is not very different from the procedure followed in the core subjects. English, as mentioned earlier is a four-credit course which means that hundred marks are allotted for the testing of English in each semester. The hundred marks are split into 50 marks for internal assessment and 50 marks for the end-semester examination. The 50 marks allotted for internal assessment are distributed among three class tests. The design, conduct and marking of the three class tests are left to the individual teachers. For reasons of convenience the portions for an entire semester are decided at the beginning of each semester by the co-ordinator for the subject. The papers set by teachers for the class tests are not monitored except that a copy of the question paper is submitted to the co-ordinator for record keeping.

The end semester examination question paper, on the other hand, is set by the coordinator alone and the contents are not divulged to the other teachers. The end semester examination is basically a summative examination. It consists of two major sections. The first section assesses students' knowledge of grammatical usage and vocabulary: the second section assesses their reading and writing skills. The reading passage may
be general or specific but the writing tasks are all related to technical communication (A copy of an end semester examination question paper is given in Appendix 3). The marking procedure is slightly different in the case of the end semester examination. In a sense the marking is monitored because the key which is prepared by the co-ordinator is to be strictly adhered to by the other teachers in marking their papers. This is to ensure uniformity in the marking of answer scripts. After the correction is completed the teachers sit together and decide on the different grades that are to be awarded to students. The grouping of marks for each grade differs every semester depending on the performance of the students. In total eight grades are awarded to students. The two columns below show the grades awarded to students and the normal distribution of marks for each grade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADES</th>
<th>MARKS</th>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Above 87</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>81-86</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>74-80</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>65-73</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>51-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>42-50</td>
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<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>41 and below (fail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
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</table>

A lot of time is spent by the co-ordinator and the other teachers in working out the grades. Almost always student grades are sacrificed for the perfect rise and fall of the 'normal distribution curve'. The process by which
the grades for different marks is arrived at is kept a closely guarded secret from the students. In such a testing situation students naturally tend to view the grading pattern as highly competitive because though a student might have improved his performance the grade may not change significantly. In such a teaching context as Rowntree remarks,

"... the grade awarded to a student depends not on the absolute level of performance he attains but on how he performs relative to other students. That is, he may improve his performance by 100%, but if everyone else improves similarly his grade will be no higher than before. To get a better grade he must take it from one of the students above him by out performing him" (Rowntree, 1987).

3.5.1 A critique of the materials, methods and language testing practice at the University

A special needs course assumes that all students, no matter what their proficiency in English, are at an imaginary zero level. However, the imaginary zero level does not preclude nil proficiency in the language, on the other hand, it assumes that students have basic fluency in English. And surely students who are fairly fluent in English are more successful in learning the difference, however fine, between general English and specific purpose English. The present ESP course at the university is a success so far as average and above average students are concerned. But for students with limited proficiency in English the course is difficult. The preparation lessons prepare these students only for the general class but do not significantly help them develop their communication skills in the language and therefore are not of great help. Bloom et al.,'s observation of the education scenario in America in the sixties holds true in the present Indian teaching context,
"The assumption of homogeneity of education backgrounds might have been safer in the past, before our society became so highly mobile. However, most classes today, particularly in our urban and suburban schools, are made up of students with a wide variety of educational backgrounds, lacking complete uniformity in the patterns of achievement and differing with respect to the nature, amount and depth of independent study and reading. As this diversification of backgrounds increases, the variance from an imaginary zero point increases... . In fact, some students may well be beyond the zero point, already having mastered all or many of the competencies the course has been designed to develop. On the other hand, some students fall below it - that is, they possess few or none of the entry behaviour, skills and content judged to be prerequisite for future progress" (Bloom et al., 1971).

Syllabus designers and materials developers in India though they may have been teachers themselves at some point in their career, fail to consider the vast differences between the imaginary zero level or rather levels at which students can be placed. This is one reason why classical writers continue to be prescribed for study by students as part of the general English course in Arts and Science colleges. The single major drawback of the present syllabus at the university is that it has failed to address the real language needs of LEP students. The reality is that LEP students are not yet ready for ESP because they do not have the necessary base in the language. Again as Bloom et al.'s observe, "We should not expect materials and methods developed for average or successful students to work with those lacking the necessary learning" (Bloom et al.,'s 1971). At the university if the language teacher really wishes to 'help' LEP students then it necessarily means that he will have to prepare extra materials that will help them develop their communication skills in the English.
The current testing procedure is also not sensitive to the difference between proficiency levels of students and therefore the testing does not "...have a beneficial impact or 'educational impact' on both learners and teachers" (Carroll, 1985). Again, the course aims at developing all the four communication skills but so far as testing is concerned only the writing and the reading skills are tested. The one single reason for this perhaps is the large number of students (60-70) in a single class. But, the assessment of only the writing and the reading skills for evaluating the overall language proficiency of students means,

- the amount of class time that is devoted to the development of the remaining two skills is significantly less.

- that the class tests also follow the end-semestcr examination pattern. They assess grammar and writing (reading is rarely assessed in the class tests).

The class tests which form the internal assessment are not formative as they should ideally be; they could be termed as 'mini-achievement' tests. The focus of these tests is to simply check whether students have grasped the language items that formed part of the study in the classes preceding the test and therefore the progress of students especially those with limited proficiency in English is not charted. Since the internal assessment is not formative and diagnostic the teachers do not know how to help LEP students realistically. When classroom testing is not diagnostic then it is extremely difficult for the teacher to identify the specific problem areas of the students. Diagnostic tests help the teacher,

"...evaluate not the progress of individual students but also the effectiveness of the programme itself, because any weakness in the course will be reflected in the common weakness of a number
students in a group. Common and recurring problems are clear indications that the related teaching and materials need closer scrutiny" (Caroll, 1985).

At present the testing of language proficiency in both class tests and end-semester examinations is haphazard and not a clear indicator of students proficiency in English. In an ESP context this lack of focus and purpose in second language testing has a telling impact on the teaching and the learning initiated in the classroom.

3.6 DESCRIPTION OF A LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY STUDENT IN ANNA UNIVERSITY

Students are admitted into the university and other professional (medicine and engineering) institutions in the State of Tamilnadu based on the marks obtained by them in the school-leaving examination and the marks obtained in the entrance examination conducted by the university on behalf of the state government. The entrance examination tests students proficiency in Maths, Physics and Chemistry for engineering and Physics, Chemistry and Biology for those who wish to specialise in medicine. The test format for all the three subjects is multiple-choice. The question booklet has questions printed both in English and in Tamil the regional language. This is to help students from L1 medium schools. The answer scripts are machine scored. In terms of the composition of students in engineering institutions approximately more than fifty percent of the students are from state-run, L1 medium schools. These students naturally form the group whose proficiency in English is limited to the extent of being a severe impediment to them doing well in their studies. The following paragraphs describe the limited English proficiency student in the university. This description however is not limited to this university alone but is applicable
to students who can be placed in this category in colleges and universities elsewhere in India.

Besides LEP other terms are used to refer to students with limited English skills, some of them are: slow learners, false beginners, the English Language Learner (ELL). Before attempting to define an LEP student in the university it must be remembered that the name ‘LEP’ is given to some students only when they join colleges and universities where the medium of instruction is English. An LEP student is not one with stunted intelligence. In many cases these students have records of academic success their only limitation is that they cannot demonstrate their knowledge in English. This limitation in a student means that he requires extra help in the form of suitable materials, methods and tests to help him become fluent in English. Killebrew uses the term ‘false beginners’ to refer to these students, he states that,

"A false beginner can be briefly described as a student who has a formal background in language instruction, generally several years, and has been exposed to a fairly extensive array of language and structure. However, the student still maintains a low, often non-existent, communicative ability. In other word, a student's classroom exposure to the language far exceeds his ability to use that language"(Killebrew, 2000).

In a developing country like India, the causes that lead to some students being labelled LEP are directly linked to the existing malaise in the social and economic structure of modern Indian society. Modern India continues to be divided in terms of caste and community. The caste system may not be visible in metropolitan centres with their amorphous and fluid population but in small towns and villages it is practised with the same rigidity that was there hundreds of years ago. Along side the existing divisions newer stratifications have occurred in the society and these are
based on money and political power. Hence, to arrive at a comprehensive description of a limited English student in India the social, economic and political factors must be considered. An LEP student is mostly from the economically and socially backward sections of the society. Socially, he belongs to the depressed classes that have been subordinated for centuries. Coming from a social background that is backward these students are naturally inhibited. Their inhibitions prevent them from interacting with their peers on an equal footing, interacting with teachers by participating in class activities and so on. They prefer to 'stick' to people from their own background because they seem to receive strength and courage from the solidarity of their own respective group.

Apart from being inhibited another typical characteristic of LEP students is their tendency to doubt their capabilities and intelligence. As Saraswathi remarks, "The one feature that all adolescent slow learners share is an utterly negative view of self; they lack almost entirely, a sense of self-respect" (Saraswathi, 1991). Basically, they are shy, withdrawn, introverted and timorous in nature. They show a strong disinclination to participate in class activities and prefer to remain passive listeners and spectators. This typical behaviour of LEP students is a direct outcome of their social and economic environments. Students who belong to the depressed sections of society especially those from rural areas find it extremely difficult to break the shackles that bind their communities cognitively, physically, socially, economically, politically and still prove their worth academically.

3.7 ENGLISH AND THE LEP STUDENT

While education policy makers in India keep vacillating on their choice of English as the medium of instruction at the primary and secondary levels, their choice of English as the medium of instruction at the tertiary
level is unanimous. Whatever personal views they have over the continuing dependence on English, they realise the importance of fluency in English at the tertiary level without which students would be unable to expand their job and study opportunities. The burgeoning middle classes and the working classes are aware of the need to learn English and parents from these two classes are willing to make heavy sacrifices in order to give their wards an English medium education. English is seen by them as a liberating and empowering force.

To the LEP student English is his window to the world. He feels that this language will open up new vistas and opportunities for him. Proficiency in English to him means: an assertive personality, acceptance into mainstream society, respectability and social mobility (When asked what they expect from the English course at the university they invariably say that it contributes to their personality development). In the academic context proficiency in English means better grades, active participation in co- and extra-curricular activities and greater acceptance by peers. The LEP students' proficiency in the language does not match with their aspirations. With limited proficiency in English they are unable to cope with the academic load and interact with their peers who are fluent in English. The plight of the LEP student in colleges and universities in India can never be exaggerated. A good number of these students at the university were school-toppers but in the university their grades are poor and they have to reconcile themselves to lower ranks. Recent research in language testing, significantly by Troike (1991) has shown that limited proficiency in English need not be an impediment to academic achievement. In her paper Troike argues that positive transfer of learning skills from native to the foreign language will help all students irrespective of their proficiency levels improve their academic scores. The situation in India however is different because of the lack of a strong and supportive educational atmosphere that
allows this positive transfer to take place. Again only a few students are capable of doing it and not the majority.

In a technical teaching context where students' academic achievement is inextricably linked to proficiency in English these students work under tremendous pressure. They have the first duty of not disappointing their parents, their respective communities' aspirations and their own dreams of becoming professionals. The two columns below present the contrast between the benefits accruing from being fluent in English and the stark reality of an LEP student's proficiency in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency in English means...</th>
<th>The reality is...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. learning will be more enjoyable and substantial than it is at present.</td>
<td>learning especially knowledge comprehension and assimilation in core subjects is an arduous and frustrating experience. (It is a common sight in the university hostel to see these students with the prescribed text or lecture notes on one hand and the dictionary on the other). These students are highly motivated but sometimes their motivation tends to wane and then they have problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. better grades.</td>
<td>there is definitely a significant dip in the grades obtained by them when compared to their performance in schools.</td>
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Fluency in English means...

3. better comprehension that will help them retain information more easily.

4. greater accessibility to knowledge sources like the internet.

5. better chances of being accepted by peers from city schools.

6. an assertive personality. This would mean that they would have greater confidence to take on new responsibilities.

7. capability to expand their thinking on any subject.

The reality is...

that today they are forced to do rote-learning.

that today their knowledge is restricted to the prescribed textbook and notes dictated by teachers.

these students stand on the fringe and are content to be spectators. Interaction is limited to one's circle.

that they are racked by self doubt and are in fear of being ridiculed by peers; they prefer to remain the silent majority.

that today they are impoverished for new ideas and generally take a longer time to comprehend anything new. This general poverty so far as ideas are concerned is because the advocates of the regional languages in their bid to maintain and preserve the purity of these languages have also prevented them from growing. So far as science, technology and business are concerned English still reigns supreme.
3.8 ASSESSMENT AND THE LEP STUDENT

Assessment as discussed in the first chapter is a very human activity. We are constantly assessing and evaluating things and people and are also being assessed and evaluated by them in return. As Rowntree points out,

"Assessment will remain with us from the cradle to beyond the grave. Scarcely have we taken our first breath we have a label fastened to our wrists, giving weight at, and method of, birth, and, somewhere, our first file (medical) has already been opened. From then on, the assessments come thick and fast—from doctors, parents, siblings, peers, teachers, employers (and prospective employers), and practically every one we have dealings with" (Rowntree, 1987).

Educational assessment has a crucial role to play in the life of a student. It can spur the student to great heights or it can demotivate him to a state of indifference and inactivity. Callous, careless and apathetic attitude to the testing process by the teacher can spell doom for the student. This is not to imply that assessment must be made simpler so as not to hurt a student’s self-esteem and worth but it has to be designed with a lot of care and thought because, seemingly small errors can cause a major set back in the students’ career.

The role played by examinations and tests in students' lives in India can never be overstated. There are many cases of missed chances that change the entire course of a person's life both academically and personally. The adage 'There's many a slip between the cup and the lip', holds true for the existing examination system in the country. The greatest obstacle at
Attempts to evolve a testing policy has been the sheer numbers of students at all the levels. Though a large number of students is a reality, as yet no policy, has been formulated to address issues related to large scale testing.

So far as assessment of LEP students in India is concerned it is largely subjective and prejudiced. Overt prejudice is present but it is covert prejudice that causes more damage. Covert prejudice can be defined as something that is performed in the mind of the teacher regarding students' capabilities. It is the preconceived idea of what students belonging to a certain social, or ethnic class or group are capable of. As stated earlier the acronym LEP in India refers to students who come from sections of the society that have still failed to gain a foothold in mainstream society. They belong to social classes that are seen but rarely heard. In an academic context when the assessment of the learning of LEP students depends largely on the predilection of the individual teacher then assessment is not of their learning but of them as individuals. When assessment of his learning depends on the whims of the teacher then the student has a lot to fear and he is sceptical about the process itself. A teacher who is convinced about the capability of a particular student will be totally ignorant of the signs of 'progress' in his students' performance. This awareness on the part of the student "... cramps personal learning styles and discourages the 'weak' learner's potential for growth" (Produmou, 1995).

Teachers in India, language teachers notwithstanding are outmoded, outdated, rigid and biased in their attitudes towards LEP students which influences their assessment of these students. Progress made by the student is unacknowledged or is taken as freak behaviour and once the student becomes aware of the mental block of the teacher, he is unwilling to work harder; as Rowntree observes, "Sometimes children may
perform poorly not because they cannot but because they do not care to do well ",(Rowntree, 1987). Second language teachers in India with inadequate training and those with training but with deep set views about what to expect from certain classes of students do great damage to the already poor self-esteem of these students, "... teachers, who are in authority have successfully brain-washed our learners into a totally negative perception of themselves-in other words, they begin to believe that they are dummies" (Saraswathi, 1991). Teachers do not seem to realise that repeated poor performance can also be a reflection of poor teaching.

3.8.1 Current language testing practice at the university and the LEP student

The ESP course at the university was designed for the benefit of engineering and technology students at the university. As explained earlier the ESP syllabus incorporates lessons in the text book that are meant to help LEP students' improve their proficiency in the language. Thus the ESP course has meant changes in materials and methodology but the testing is not in consonance with the syllabus.

Several issues need to be sorted out in the current language testing practice at the university. Neither the end semester examinations nor the class tests which form part of the internal assessment are valid assessments of students' proficiency in the language. For those students who are fluent in English this is of no great consequence because their language is most often correct, clear and coherent and therefore they are not unduly worried about whether their ESP skills are rated highly or not. But in the case of LEP students, the mismatch between the course objectives and the testing practice is an issue to be concerned about. Listed below are some of the
discrepancies present in second language testing practice at the university with specific reference to students with limited English skills.

• The underlying premise for language assessment at the university seems to be the 'one test fits all' myth. While the syllabus recognises the difference in the proficiency levels of students and makes some provision for the same in the text book, the testing fails to do the same. This has serious repercussions on the teaching and learning process in the special classes that are meant specifically for LEP students.

• The class tests as stated earlier are not formative and diagnostic in nature which means that the progress made by LEP students in the language is never clearly traced. Therefore these students have no opportunity of ascertaining the progress they have made in developing their communication skills in English. This can be very discouraging to the students because the focus of the class tests and the end semester examinations being different their poor performance in both is a foregone conclusion.

• There is no comprehensive feedback given to the students on their performance in the tests. No doubt this varies from one individual teacher to another. Again, the feedback given to these students is a futile exercise because the tests themselves are unrelated to the needs of limited English students.

• The current testing practice does not encourage or motivate these students to enhance their language learning skills.
The administration of the placement test is a static exercise because after the identification of students who can be categorised as having limited proficiency in English nothing further is done through tests to track their progress or to see if they are making any progress at all. For example, in the present study tests at periodical intervals showed that student 3 was not benefitting significantly either with the teaching or with the materials used to develop writing skills.

The scores and the grades awarded to students do not explain comprehensively the proficiency levels of a student. For example, there is no way by which to show how a student who secures 'S' grade in the language is different in terms of language proficiency from a student who secures 'E' grade. Being an ESP course it is perhaps necessary that band descriptors are created which describe comprehensively what each of the grades represent in terms of proficiency in English. This means that the assessment pattern for English will have to be different from what it is for the core subjects. Bands will help students be more clear about their skills in the language.

The dice is heavily loaded against LEP students so far as the current language testing practice at the University is concerned. The tests do not help second language teachers take decisions regarding modification of existing teaching materials or changing the methodology because the tests give them no clue at all regarding the progress that their students are making in the language. Again, some of these students may have made good progress and would be fit to join the general class, but neither the teacher nor the student has any way of ascertaining this. So those students who are
categorised as LEP students in the placement test at the beginning of the first semester continue to remain so till the end of the second semester. The existing language testing practice needs to be reviewed and altered suitably so that it reflects comprehensively the language learning of LEP students.

3.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the background of the teaching context in which the study was carried out. It has also attempted to place the LEP student in the Indian academic context and discussed the constraints-social, economic and also the strong biases of teachers within which LEP students are expected to operate and emerge successful. It has also emphasised the importance of English in the life of a LEP student. The next chapter will report on the study and its outcomes.