CHAPTER - III

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH
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Critical to any consideration of classroom oriented research is the research design, a discussion of which would lend coherence to the exploration, as every single observable event may not subject itself to interpretation within the overall pattern. A statement of the research design would lend a gestalt to the communicative face of the classroom.

Observation as part of teacher training assumes that "we can actually define what is good and what is bad teaching behaviour". But current thinking on teacher training and teacher development has revised its viewpoint on classroom observation and concluded that classroom observation should be "developmental" rather than "judgemental". Suggestions to make classroom observation developmental includes the teacher's working on a self-evaluation form which comprised questions which would serve as awareness raising activity. A sample question administered to the teacher in the primary project, British Council, Singapore was 'write down a question you will ask to encourage a thoughtful answer rather than a correct answer'. Observation in teacher training, thus, has come to be dovetailed to the teacher's reflecting on the lesson and the student's response. This practice would suggest ways round the observer's paradox.

The concept of the teacher as a researcher is gaining momentum, even as the language teaching profession is becoming increasingly aware of the demands made on the teacher not only as a performer of action but an explainer of the rationale behind
her own actions in the classroom. It might not be possible for the teacher, hereafter to remain a facile thinker and a good classroom performer anymore. At one end of the spectrum the trainers motivate the teachers to reflect on their own behaviour in the classroom. Investigations on teacher performance include issues like planning, implementation classroom management, Talk, Interaction etc. At a very highly speculative end of the spectrum the teachers' beliefs and values about language learning and teaching are examined considering the metaphors and images the teachers use when they talk about language learning and teaching.

The teacher who has already been given a crucial role to play can be a good researcher. A descriptive research design depends on the teacher's plan in the execution of an activity alongwith introspective accounts of how the research environment was conducive or otherwise for carrying out the plan. Added to this will be the teacher's narration of why particular strategies have failed. The teacher as researcher would be in a happy position to record, to the benefit of the profession, certain non-measurable elements of ESL, like the strategies she uses for motivating the learners, the reasons for learner underinvolvement, the personality traits which influence learning, attitudinal constraints etc.

This perception of teacher as researcher runs parallel to what Nunan would consider as "a move away from teacher as passive recipient and implementer of other peoples' syllabuses and methods, towards the idea of the teacher as an active creator of her own materials, classroom activities and so on." While
Nunan's concern here is methodological, elsewhere he starts with the research perspective. By becoming research oriented teachers inevitably reflect on their own classroom strategies which is a step forward in teachers' developing an extensive repertoire of classroom management and teaching techniques.

Brumfit's arguments to promote the methods debate make it axiomatic that learning and teaching as a social activity is understood better from within the profession, by doing rather than by contemplating. Teaching according to him is an intervention process which introduces considerable change in a person's behaviour. It needs a human agency, therefore to effect that change. Any debate on methodology, in his perception should include the teacher's direct experience. Brumfit writes:

'Knowledge of what it is to be a language teacher' has a legitimate claim to be considered in methodological discussion, as it is expressed through the accumulated professional wisdom, and folly of teachers. Language teaching tradition, by the mere fact of its existence as tradition, has to be seen in part as knowledge about language teaching. To claim this is not to argue for an uncritical acceptance of tradition, nor that traditions are not shaped in part by laziness or outmoded assumptions; it is to recognize that we cannot understand teaching methodology by simply considering language and the processes of teaching from the outside.

The insider's viewpoint, crucial for the methods debate, has a legitimate place in the ethnographic research tradition.
Ethnography, a tool in sociolinguistic field research is conducted with a view to understanding the 'speech' of a particular ethnic group, devising as many metacategories as possible as descriptors of the language occurrence. Speech is investigated into, not as comprising of isolable linguistic units, but as part of the context. In the words of Dell Hymes, "speech is surrogate for all forms of language, including writing, song and speech derived whistling, drumming horn calling" and the like.

In ethnography the basic unit of analysis is the speech event. As ethnographers depend largely on the indexical features of language "situated speech" becomes the theme of any ethnographic study. From the ethnographer's point of view "language is the chief means of enculturation and communication."

The ethnographer believes that

Command of language and culture requires far more than control of lexicon and syntax and more than control of para-linguistic and kinetic signs - good speech manners may be more useful than technical control of the features of language; in much the same way that native speaker's intonation contours are more conducive to efficient communication than an extensive vocabulary or an impeccable grammar.

Educational ethnography, which frameworks the investigation reported here shares some of the beliefs of the ethnographer. The classroom is the speech community, the target language setting the norms and thereby creating a separate culturally identifiable group. The group, heterogeneous in composition, shares the common
concern of contextualizing private meaning in the target language. As it happens in ethnographic study, form and meaning are not to be identified as separate entities. What is said is closely linked to how it is said. In the study reported, the problem of coding the message into select structures is approached from the point of view of stylistic and rhetorical features. While the spoken form of the language consisted of ritualistic routines and formulaic expressions the written form manifested through the learner's attempt to create new language. Communication in the classroom is effected through the schematic knowledge the learners bring to bear on the speech event, which process is similar to the deciphering of messages in a speech community by a participant, capitalizing on the indexical features of the language. The lesson in the classroom "as a speech event" in the words of Frederic R Erickson is Janus faced. Members of the lesson are able to take advantage of shared cultural norms of interpretation and performance that help students to define structure points, and they are able to open to the unique circumstances of fortuitous happening. As there are no fixed rules of grammar in the speech events of a community, variability becomes a phenomenon to be observed in the speech community and by extension in the classroom.

Educational ethnography which was pursued rigorously in the U.S.A. in the 60's complexified research into classroom events by breaking the facile reasoning that teaching causes learning directly. It also established that learning is a "stochastic process" in which a random series of events interacts with a selective process." Ethnography counteracts the philosophy of
process - product research by combining "knowing how to teach, knowing as an outsider what teachers do and knowing from experience the practice of teaching". Cause and effect research in its attempts at concentrating on neat divisions and distinctions might trivialize the complex and contradictory experiences encountered by teachers in real classroom. The solution sought the ethnographic way is not to leave research to the custody of the "outsider".

Educational ethnography is not without its problems the chief among them being the credentialling problem. Ethnography is learnt by doing it as there are no fixed rules as to how to do it. Leo van Lier, contends that "the worker in the field is essentially alone, and inevitably learns as much from opportunities missed, false leads too strenuously pursued and insights bypassed inexplicable ways, as from routine description and categorization."

The dominant question that would arise in the pursuit of ethnography is whether it would accommodate a priori characterization of the research question. Research in its entirety cannot be conducted in piecemeal fashion as merely as an ongoing activity. Moreover, any teaching programme has to assume certain characteristics, some of them born out of the subjectivity of the teacher. Allwrights' stance provides a basis for an interesting debate in this context. He asserts that "... the characterization of teaching and learning environments is something that must emerge from research rather than something that can be imposed on research." Rod Ellis responds to this argument claiming that research cannot exist
independently of what the methodologists consider to be important. He reviews Allwright's position stating that "Allwright's arguments do not warrant a dismissal of hypotheses testing research - whether the hypotheses derive from a linguistic - psycholinguistic theory or from educational pedagogic constructs." Ellis attributes this line of reasoning to the "problematic" nature of the "dependent variable - learning."

In the ethnographic account of learning a simple grammatical judgement task to establish that teaching causes learning would leave out many factors like non-language learning outcomes like strategic, interpersonal and sociolinguistic competences. The process view of language learning advocated by CLT ideology, which is the theme of the next chapter, accommodates such a perspective. The debate on a priori definition of classroom research is given a unitary dimension by Leo Van Lier who projects two principles of ethnography, an emic viewpoint, and a wholistic treatment of cultural factors, or in other words a preoccupation with the context. In the words of Van Lier "working both with emic and etic considerations the ethnographer continually walks a fine line between naive observation and externally imposed interpretation."

The present study can be called an ethnographic study from the point of view of the teacher-researcher. At the speculative end of the spectrum can be placed the teacher's conviction as to the efficacy of CLT fuelled research which constitutes the etic point of view, by virtue of its being a structured view. This structured view was constantly adjusted to the learner's difficulties, the challenges posed by the text, constantly
revising the instructional modes to information abstracted from feedback.

The present study had a subject population of a heterogeneous group of thirty six students, majority of them from families without a sound financial and educational background. The course in English on to which the experimental treatment was superimposed was run for four semesters starting in the first year undergraduate class. The actual time involved was 360 contact hours which spanned for two years. Data for the project was collected mainly through learners' everyday composition work and the class progress tests conducted along with the summative examination conducted at the end of each semester. Oral tests were administered to test the learners' oral communication skills at several points of time in the project. Teacher contact with the students was established through informal counselling sessions for reformulation of composition and error-correction. Questionnaires were administered to the learners for pooling data regarding the learner's willingness to perform a particular task, and the difficulties involved in performing them. The teacher's diary was another source of information which narrated the ongoing events which offered the teacher-researcher the benefit of hindsight. The entries talked about teacher intervention, learner motivation, learner response to a particular type of tasks etc. Triangulation of data was achieved in the project through these different means. The diary entries indicated that while reading and writing was pursued in the class vigorously not all areas of foreign language teaching was given sufficient attention. Pronunciation practice, for instance formed part only
of incidental teaching.

The study also concentrated on interaction in the classroom. While summarizing several ways of conducting an ethnographic study Van Lier cites research done by Dick Allwright which examined "patterns of participation" by using a transcribed lesson to comment on the turn taking system. Classroom interaction in the present study establishes a relationship between the teacher's plotting her way through the prescribed texts and the dominant strategies followed by the learners while responding to instructional events. While Allwright's study can be considered micro-ethnographic, the present study can be called macro-ethnographic. A minute analysis of data in this context might not yield rich insights when compared to a broad analysis of data. The teacher's subjective observation played a crucial role in interpreting classroom events. True to the ethnographic tradition learner-language was looked at from different angles to discover whether performing of certain specified tasks impacted their spoken language with and without reference to the text situation, written language in the text situation and in an extended context. This kind of analysis of details was set off against certain hypotheses which provided the theoretical foci for researcher. The hypotheses are given below:

1. In an institutionalised setting a conventional curriculum which does not have clearly defined objectives and aims can be given a communicative slant. This attempt specifies classroom activities which lend a coherent structure to the curriculum.
2. When communication becomes the primary pedagogic operation in the classroom extension of grammatical competence is regarded as a meta communicative activity which forms a continuum with the communicative activity.

3. Teaching materials which are given to the teacher and the taught can be converted into communicative acts, which are realized as teaching and learning acts in the classroom.

4. Central to the teaching acts and learning acts is the 'task' which is defined in the project as any plan of action which facilitates language learning.

5. The task creates a meaningful communication situation which enables the learner to activate his schematic knowledge of the world as well as the target language into meaningful response. The tasks aim at the students' acquiring the sub-skills which are tested in the summative examination.

The hypotheses amounted to certain crucial pedagogic decisions. But these decisions were not directly warranted by the official syllabus and the prescribed text books. It was imperative for the study to capture the "emergent content" an offshoot of the official syllabus in classroom terms. Syllabus as advocated by a traditional curriculum is a document which has a priori notions as to the desirable learning outcomes. It is also a guidance for the unfolding of educational events in the classroom. Michael Breen defines a syllabus "as a shareable plan" which is "open to instruction and evaluation." He also adds,
"In language teaching the prime function of a syllabus has been to map out the content or subject matter of our courses and thereby to indirectly guide and serve the teaching and learning of that subject matter." The syllabus that is 'given' to the teacher in the context of the present project is a set of texts consisting of a prose anthology, a collection of poems, a text designed specifically for learning English and two non-detailed texts. This syllabus has to be expanded if it is to meet some of the specifications forwarded by Breen. Against the traditional notion of a syllabus can be placed this process view of syllabus which is negotiated in the class on an adhoc basis. Breen writes "in the lesson to lesson reality of language teaching, we are continually concerned with three syllabuses, the teacher's version of the predesigned plan, the individual learner syllabus and the unfolding syllabus of the classroom - the last being the synthesis of the two."

The concept of the teachers' syllabus alongwith the learners' syllabus is discussed in current literature. Learner's syllabus refers to the internal syllabus of the learner to which the learning process is attuned. This is in relation to what happens in the mind of the learner. As this constitutes a dark area pertaining to the neural events of the brain of each individual only predictions can be made as to what is likely to happen in the individual's mind. However intervention is possible in the official syllabus by converting it into a teacher's syllabus in response to the actual learning that takes place in the class.

The official syllabus in the present project is expanded into tasks, in Allwright's words in terms of "what is available for
learning". In a general context a syllabus specifies learning units in terms of grammatical units: syllabus specification depends on the basic language teaching philosophy which informs curriculum design. If development of grammatical competence is the main aim of the course then the syllabus would deal with units of grammar in a systematic way, proceeding on the assumption that learning is an additive, linear process. In the present context, the texts prescribed which constituted the syllabus did not have any overt language teaching philosophy or objectives to guide the teacher. The official syllabus in terms of the texts prescribed assumed perhaps that a syllabus should emerge on its own in the process of negotiating a text. Another aim in prescribing texts for learning the language must have been that of creating communication situations to negotiate language. The unstated communicative aim therefore was stated through an ethnographic approach. The negotiable elements of the text were outlined in interactional terms. The extremely vague communicative aim was narrowed down to be specified as attainment of certain skills and abilities in the target language.
NOTES

CHAPTER-III


2 ibid., 88.


9 Ethel M. Albert, "Culture patterning of speech behaviour in Burundi", Directions 99.
10 ibid.,


12 Leovan Lier, "Ethnography: Bandaid, Bandwagon or Contraband", Research in the Language Classroom 37.

13 Brumfit and Mitchell, Research in the Language Classroom 11.

14 Leovan Lier, Research in the Language Classroom 41.

15 Rod Ellis, "Researching Classroom Language Learning", Research in the Language Classroom 57.

16 ibid.,

17 Emic and Etic are clippings from the terms phonetic and phonemic. The etic is that which Generalizes without reference to a particular context. The emic refers to rules and concepts, useful in a particular context.

18 Leovan Lier, "Ethnography", Research in the Language Classroom 43.

19 ibid., 48

20 Michael P. Breen, "Process syllabuses for the Language classroom", General English Syllabus Design, ELT Documents: 118,

21 ibid.,

22 ibid., 50.