CHAPTER-VI

Second Language Development inside the Classroom

It is observed that in classroom second language learning situations (ESL in this context) we come across two types of students: one very fluent in communicating orally in the target language (namely, English) without any inhibition, and the other, in spite of possessing a fairly good knowledge of the system of rules underlying the use of the language, being unable to use the language effectively in connected speech or writing.

Subjected to careful scrutiny the facility to function in the target language or the lack of it reveals some very interesting facts. Students of the latter type usually come from regional language medium schools where there is some systematic teaching of English grammar rules, word meanings, etc. The emphasis in the ESL programme is on knowledge about the language rather than the language itself. The programme planners seem to be ignorant of the fact that systematic attention to the grammatical form of utterances is not sufficient for successful language learning.

Overt learning of abstract grammatical rules has not been conspicuously successful in producing students capable of using a new language creatively, that is, students skilled in speaking (listening, reading, writing) without having to hesitate to consider what is structurally permissible. (Rivers, Speaking in Many Tongues)

This is so because "use of a foreign language is more than the sum of its parts...." (Rivers, Speaking in Many Tongues)
Students belonging to the former type referred to above are usually from target language medium schools where, in addition to a cursory teaching of grammar rules, they are encouraged to use the target language from the beginning for communication. The emphasis is on skill, but with scant respect for appropriacy and acceptability. Consequently, this type of students, while appearing to be fluent communicators, in reality, lack a proper understanding of the system governing the use of the language. Rivers's (Speaking in Many Tongues) comment on such a scheme of language teaching was: "without some knowledge of structure and its flexible potential, this can result in a glib inaccuracy."

In the final analysis, competent use of a language is a matter of producing discourse characteristic of that language. Some of the factors that contribute to achieving competence in the use of a second language are discussed below.

Knowledge of the rules and the forms of the language

It is a universal truth that no learner, native or otherwise, can memorize all the possible sentences in a language and reproduce them on appropriate occasions. He will need to compose his own syntactically correct and semantically logical sentences, and to be able to do so, he must have easy access to the mechanics of sentence production in the language.

The abstract rules governing the use of a particular language and the forms in that language together constitute what
is known as the code. The native speaker, while communicating, may not directly draw from the knowledge of the code, but this does not mean that he has not got any knowledge of the grammar and lexicon of the language. To be able to function freely in the language as he does, one must necessarily possess it.

In the native learner's case, there is so much 'use' and repetition of at least the most commonly used units of the code all around him and by him that the question of his having to be deliberately taught how rules and forms combine to make the code does not arise at all; he is in a position to take the code for granted and proceed under such an assumption towards the activity of code-meaning linking. In the case of the ESL learner, considering the meagreness of his exposure to English, we are forced to see the need for the deliberate teaching of the rules and the forms.

(David, Remedial Teaching)

Consequent to his rich exposure to the language the native learner automatically, and without any conscious effort, acquires a large number of grammatically composed, readily re-usable word-strings, which are symbolic representations of oft-communicated units of thoughts, ideas and concepts in the language. In the process he takes note of and internalizes the syntactic and semantic generalizations underlying the word-strings. The native user then draws on this internalized repertoire, without being fully aware of its being there, as and when needed. Thus, even though the native learner does not use abstract rules consciously to arrive at the overt forms he produces, whatever he overtly produces conforms to the internalized system of rules.
The ideal second language learner will also exhibit a similar behaviour because he would be learning the language in an ideal situation where exposure is rich and varied as that for the native learner. But, for the typical classroom second language learner, it is a different story. Exposure being meagre and defective, he must engage in a deliberate and systematic study of the rules and forms of the target language.

As pointed out earlier in Chapter-III, language is primarily a semantic organization in which the code plays a subservient role of conveying whatever is mentally represented. The code has to be mastered, no doubt. But once mastered, it should go down into the subconscious stratum of the mind, from which position it should monitor the production of utterances which are syntactically acceptable.

Therefore, while it is necessary to teach the units of the code systematically in the second language classroom, it should be borne in mind that what we can teach will not take the learner to the end of what he has to learn.

Meaning-code links

The present consensus appears to be that it is the logical structures basic to various intellectual processes that are innate and that distinguish man as a species, not language-specific structures, and that these logical structures make it possible for man to acquire and use language as well as to perform other cognitive operations. (Rivers, Communicating Naturally)
Logical structures here refer to the meaning-structures which exist in the mind of man and enable him to acquire and use language. Syntactic structures must no doubt be acquired, but in isolation, they represent only an abstract system by which language may be described. The entities that give a tangible existence to a living language are the ties existing between the syntactic structuring system on the one hand and the meaning structuring system (pre-existing in the mind of the language user) on the other. Each language unit is a syntactically structured representation of a corresponding meaning-unit. Both structuring systems have equal prominence in the language internalization process, the central factor in the process being the linking of the two, or the mapping of the one structure onto the other. Consequent to this linking or mapping process is the internalization of concrete language-units (not abstract structures) as the linguistic representations of meaning-units existing in the mind.

The first language learning child, as a result of listening to a lot of the language being used in natural communication situations all around him, is naturally provided with adequate repetitions of a sufficient number of meaning-code links. These units of language are already organized in a particular way in relation to meaning. In the child's effort to master these linguistic units, the meaning potential that he was
born with, and already existing in his mind, gets organized in accordance with the meaning-organization in the language that is presented to him. Consequently, he learns inductively, the generalizable modes of linking units of meaning with the corresponding units of the language. The second language learner too has already undergone this process, but with respect to his first language. However, different languages are organized differently in relation to meaning, and so the second language learner must, in order to become competent in the use of the target language, acquire its meaning organization. He has to organize the meaning in his mind all over again in accordance with the organization of the units of the target language that are presented to him. Since he has only very little meaningful exposure to the target language, he needs to be given systematic instruction in the rules and generalizations concerning the linking of units of meaning with the corresponding units of the code. The meaning-code links have to be painstakingly and systematically habitualized. This can be achieved by providing repeated contacts with basic language forms in context in the classroom itself. This would result in forming and habitualizing at least the minimum necessary meaning-code links.

**Word-combinations**

All languages have large numbers of word-combinations enjoying a unitary status in communication. Since languages
divide meanings along boundary lines unique to themselves, combination of words into groups for communication are also on the basis of meaning-patterns unique to languages. One must get used to and possess a considerable store of the word-combinations in a language in order to be able to start using it for effective communication. A person who is capable of the effective and rule-governed use of a language is one who, having internalized the syntactic and semantic generalizations underlying the word-combinations he has encountered in the language, can habitually, without conscious effort, extrapolate into producing original combinations on the analogy of the ones he is familiar with.

The facility to form generalizations about conventions followed in the use of language comes as a result of repeated meaningful contact with familiar words in familiar patterns. The oftener the contacts, the more easily available they will be for recall and reproduction -- not parrot-like repetitions of words and structures but repetitions aimed at achieving habitual association of ordinarily expressed meaning-units with the linguistic units which are most commonly used for representing them -- so much so that every time the same unit of meaning has to be expressed, the corresponding linguistic unit readily surfaces in the mind.

"The child's initial sentence-level utterances are, mainly, fully borrowed ones. The child habituates the use of
the structural elements through the use of a great many basic sentences internalized as single blocks. Our second language learners are never given the opportunity to repeat, internalize and reproduce (in the same way as a child does) a great many basic sentences. Only such an exercise will give them the readiness finally to take off into the free or creative use of the language. The child gets these repetitions (repeated meaningful encounters) of basic sentences naturally from his environment." (David, Remedial Teaching)

A second language learner too can achieve competence in the use of his target language only through borrowing whole phrases and sentences from speakers and writers of the target language, memorizing them, and storing them in his mind perfectly fused with the meaning-units they represent so that they can be readily recalled and reproduced as they are. A person to whom such units in a language are readily available for recall and reproduction is able to use that language effectively for communication.

Therefore, it can be assumed, on the basis of the discussion so far, that the need, as far as second language learners are concerned, is explicit teaching of the abstract rules and forms, combined with the consolidation of this learning through meaningful repetitions of specific units of the code in which the rules and forms taught figure in active use. As has already been pointed out in Chapter-III, provision should be made for the
learner to meet at close quarters a sufficiently large number of samples of discourse in the target language; he has to be led to perceive by himself the meaning relations obtaining among the various units of the code appearing within the meaning contexts provided by the pieces of discourses supplied to him. The teaching programme should try to impart to the learners as many of the generalizable meaning-language associations as possible, or in other words, should lead the learners into the meaningful possession of as rich a repertoire as possible of well-formed basic sentences in the target language with which they are enabled to use the target language code for conveying the meaning that they make in their minds.