CHAPTER-VII

Translating ESL Theory into Practices in the ESL Classroom

We argued in Chapter-II that it is the standard variety of English used for academic purposes that the Indian ESL learners at the Intermediate level need most to possess. It was observed that the possession of standard academic English would empower learners to tackle satisfactorily any specialist register that may be encountered later on in the course of study.

Unfortunately, ESL teaching in India in its present form does not provide for the learners' use of English freely and correctly in any situation, be it academic or otherwise. One of the several reasons for this is that traditionally English is treated as a subject of study. The language is equated with its code and the learners study its elements, their properties and the rules that govern their use. This is done under the assumption that mastery of the code would automatically lead to the production of discourse. But this assumption overlooks the indisputable fact that one never acquires the use of a language for any purpose if one's acquaintance with it is only as a subject of study. Mastery of the code at best enables learners to comprehend discourse in the written (textbooks) or spoken (lectures) forms. However, when the time comes for presenting the information thus comprehended (at examinations or viva voce) the ability to produce the right combinations of words and sentences with which to say or write what they want to, eludes
them. One must write, in order to learn to write, and one must speak, in order to learn to speak.

Almost always, the bulk of language production learners are required to do in the course of their study is by way of writing. However, a great majority of them write badly. Their written production is either inappropriate or incorrect, or both. Errors in the learners' written production is the single largest problem facing the teachers of ESL today. To correct or not to correct, is the question to be answered. On the one hand correcting errors in production could turn out to be a massive and tiring exercise for both teachers and learners. The former can afford to spend time on it only at the expense of other important activities in the classroom. Moreover, even if some time is found to correct at least the most glaring and serious errors, few learners bother to pay attention to the corrections. Most choose to ignore them. On the other hand, if the errors in the learners' production are not attended to, they could lead to faulty learning resulting in the acquisition of unacceptable and ungrammatical English.

Since both correcting and not correcting are unviable, the best available option is minimizing errors to the extent possible. One does not learn to write good English by writing bad English; one learns to write good English only by being helped to write good English. If there are practically no errors
or only very few of them, there need be no time and energy wasted on correction. However, error-free production is no easy thing to achieve. A close scrutiny would reveal that it is not the lexical items (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) that are problematic in learners' written production. The problems lie in the structural environments in which these appear. The structural environment, produced by the structural items, is the way rules apply to put lexical items in their proper positions and relationships so as to form an acceptable stretch of discourse. Problems with the environments are a direct fall out of the exaggerated emphasis placed on comprehension in our ESL teaching. Comprehension is getting the meaning out of the discourse, and in any discourse, most of the meaning is carried by lexical items. Therefore, wherever comprehension is the main objective of teaching/learning, all attention is focussed on the lexical items, ignoring the structural environments in which they appear. Consequently, the error-filled and inappropriate production. Error-free production pre-supposes a thorough familiarity with structural environments. A shift of focus from the message to the medium, requiring the learners to pay attention to and take possession of the language in which the message is couched, seems to be the crucial missing factor in our ESL teaching.

It is very rarely that one can make do with individual (content) words used in isolation to convey one's thoughts/ideas;
minimally a grammatical string of words is necessary. In other words, the minimal unit in communication is a string of words, and not a word in isolation. These strings are organic units, and if dismembered, will lose their communicative value.

Different languages represent reality in different ways (Whorfian hypothesis). Consequently, the formation of communicative units to convey units or segments of reality also varies from language to language. In other words, the underlying patterns governing the combination of words into communicative units in any one language are vastly different from the patterns in another. This being so, to say what one wants to say in English, one has to acquire proficiency in handling the patterns governing the combination of English words into units of communication.

However well one might know the rules of English grammar and the meanings of a good many words, it would still be impossible to make a conscious application of this knowledge to construct one's word-strings correctly for communication. The knowledge, though essential, is not sufficient. To be able to form acceptable communicational strings in English, it is inevitable that close associations be built up with a good number of model strings. This will impart to the learner not only a high degree of familiarity with oft-used word-strings, but also the opportunity to build up a repertoire of these word-strings. A
large enough repertoire would empower him to first form generalizations about conventions followed in the construction of word-strings, and subsequently to construct them independently and spontaneously.

As has already been pointed out, all languages have large numbers of word-strings enjoying a unitary status in communication. Building close associations with these specific, oft-used word-strings in a given language presupposes repeated purposeful contact with them. Native learners have a definite advantage over classroom learners in this respect. By virtue of being born in the language community the native learner is exposed to the language in the most meaningful and purposeful manner every waking moment of his life; he is naturally provided with sufficient meaningful repetitions of the most commonly used model word-strings of the language. This enables him to figure out the conventions followed in the language regarding the construction of communicative units, despite having no overt knowledge of the elements of the language and their properties. The classroom learner, on the other hand begins by mastering information regarding the elements of the language and their properties. But, his exposure to the language in use being far from adequate, he is unable to acquire proficiency in the construction and use of the communicative units.

To remedy this situation it is important that opportunities be provided to classroom ESL learners to meet, repeatedly and
meaningfully, the basic, the most essential and the most useful word-strings of English as strings. The classroom learners' overt knowledge of the elements of the language will come in handy here. The native learner, without the benefit of such knowledge, will require an enormous amount of exposure to the language in use, in order to figure out the necessary generalizations, and he has it. The classroom learner, with his minimal exposure to the language, can still be enabled to arrive at the necessary generalizations, provided that he is given a clear understanding of the language elements concerned, coupled with a sufficient number of purposeful encounters with specific strings inside which they figure in meaningful use.

In the Indian context, since reading is still the only reliable means available to the learners for meeting with standard, authentic English, it would make sense to use the ESL textbook(s) as the means for providing repeated, meaningful contact with discourse containing the much needed word-strings. However, most of the present day textbooks are assortments of literary pieces thrown in from highly varied sources; the strings encountered inside them are far from basic, and there is hardly any repetition of specific strings. It is important to ensure that the pieces chosen are restricted to a limited corpus of the basic standard variety of English. Too large and too varied a corpus would deny the learners opportunities for repeated contact with the most essential word-strings.
With a little ingenuity it should be possible to prepare a reading course that would go beyond comprehension of the content of the passages and enable the learners to build up and take possession of a limited corpus of general-service standard academic English. This study attempted the preparation of such a course. The four steps which were taken in making the course are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Step 1 was to identify certain themes suitable for the purposes envisaged, under which a primary selection of possible reading passages could be done. There were several considerations which were like principles or guidelines to be followed in the process. The most important ones among them are discussed below.

(i) Age of the learners: The themes chosen should be suitable for the learners' age. For example, Intermediate level learners, being teenagers, would not relish themes like 'life after death'.

(ii) Learners' culture: The chosen themes should be culturally familiar to the learners. For example, a topic like 'dating' will be culturally very alien to Indian learners. The point is that, while it is necessary to use pieces from discourse produced by native speakers of English, which bear the cultural stamp of the native speaker community, care should be taken to avoid themes which are culturally alien to Indian learners;
the ideal is: native-speaker discourse or culturally familiar themes and topics.

(iii) **Kind of language required to present the theme**: Technical or specialized themes such as atomic energy, for example, necessitating the use of complex language and specialized registers should be avoided.

(iv) **Mental involvement**: The themes chosen should be emotionally stimulating. Themes related to human existential facts/issues/problems will ensure learners' mental involvement.

(v) **Relevance**: The themes chosen should be of contemporary relevance to the learners. Themes like the French Revolution or the American Civil War are of no relevance to the Indian Intermediate level learners of the present day.

Five broad themes suitable for Indian Intermediate level learners were identified with the help of the guidelines given above. The themes identified were:

(1) Animal world, (2) The Universe, (3) Lands and People, (4) Travel, and (5) Social problems/issues.

Step 2 was to identify five reading passages under each broad theme. No one uses a language as effectively as its educated native users. Therefore it was decided that, as far as possible, the reading passages should be taken from the writings
of native writers, using the educated standard variety of the language, and employing an academic style of writing. It was also decided that all five passages under each broad theme should, as far as possible, be from the same source or comparable sources. This would ensure comparability of content and language across passages under the same theme. Whenever a sufficient number of passages under the same theme were not available from the same source, alternative sources dealing with the same subject matter were looked for and made use of. Wherever necessary, selected passages were (considerably) edited and/or adapted so that they fell in line with the other passages under the same broad theme, in respect of content and language.

As already stated, five passages were chosen under each broad theme. Thus theme 1 comprised passages on Fishes, Reptiles, Birds, Mammals, and Insects and Spiders; theme 2 on The Universe, The Solar System, The Earth, The Atmosphere, and Oceans and Seas; theme 3 on Canada, China, Greece, Egypt, and New Zealand; theme 4 on Road Travel, Rail Travel, Sea Travel, Air Travel, and Space Travel; and theme 5 on City Life, Pollution, Household Waste Disposal, Crime, and Drug Abuse. The reading course was thus designed to have 25 reading passages under five broad themes with each theme recurring at regular intervals, that is, passages 1, 6, 11, 16 and 21 falling under theme 1, passages 2, 7, 12, 17 and 22 falling under theme 2, and so on—a scheme to
ideally combine variety with repetition. Each reading passage was to be of the length of roughly three printed pages.

Step 3 was to identify a minimum of two (ideally at least three) sub-themes common to all five passages under each broad theme. This was crucial in order to plan and provide for the necessary repetitions of language material containing the word-strings targeted for the learners' acquisition.

Step 4, the most important of all the steps, was to plan the tasks aimed at the 'repetitions' and the 'acquisition' mentioned above. The primary conviction underlying the planning of the tasks was that spaced, meaningful repetitions are necessary for acquisition. The 'spacing' was taken care of by the recurrence of the sub-themes at regular intervals, that is, inside passages which were five passages apart from one another. The 'meaningful' handling of targeted word-strings was the one crucial factor that demanded utmost attention.

Meaningful/purposeful handling (as against mechanical handling) of a string of words can be provided for only by the learners' mental involvement in the performance of a task. Many course designers fail to see how a simple blank-filling task can ensure learners' mental involvement. Blank-filling tasks can be of two types. Type 1 is the task that asks for filling of blanks with single words. This takes care of the learners' right
comprehension of the passage in which the blanks occur; learners who comprehend rightly are able to supply the correct words for the blanks. We are interested in our learners taking steps beyond comprehension into the acquisition of certain targeted strings of words. Learners should be made to recall from memory and write out complete strings for filling blanks. This would certainly take them beyond comprehension and demand much greater mental involvement on their part in performing the task.

Step 4 in the making of the reading course under discussion here was the planning of a series of such blank-filling tasks based on each reading passage.

Another type of task planned was simple question-answering, that is, answering questions to which the answers could be lifted directly out of the reading passages. Often course designers take a great deal of trouble to ask ingenious and clever questions. Getting learners to answer such questions is an exercise in stimulating intellectual activity. No intellectual activity is legitimately called for in acquiring the meaningful use of a human language. Learners who engage in such activities inside an ESL classroom often find themselves intellectually stimulated but without any access to the English needed for concretising the output of such an exercise. with the result that the acquisition of the use of English (which should be the primary objective inside the ESL classroom) suffers the fate of an abandoned puzzle.
It is wrong to expect learners to make up their own answers to questions when they do not possess the English with which they can do so. Either they find the challenge too much and do not attempt to do the tasks, or they mess up the tasks and produce unacceptable stretches of language for answers. Either way there can be no learning of the language. Instead, if the answers are straightaway liftable from the reading passages as in the case of simple, straightforward questions and blank-filling tasks, the learners will not be faced with challenge they cannot cope with. At the same time, a simple insistence on their writing out the answers (in complete sentences) and filling up the blanks (using strings of words) from their memory, will ensure just the right degree of challenge and mental involvement on their part.

A further insistence can be on completely error-free answers. Learners often read and comprehend the content of the passages in their textbooks. It is the perennial experience in the case of ESL learners that they can understand the questions and answer them rightly, provided that they are allowed to give the answers not in English but in the language they are familiar with. This is because we take care of only their comprehension. If we insist that they take one step further and take possession of the English in which the comprehended idea occurs, we make sure that they acquire some English in the process.
One must write in order to learn to write. But one does not learn to write good English by writing bad English. One must be directed to take possession of the good English written by good users of English. Taking possession happens only with mental involvement. This is the reason why, through simple question-answering and blank-filling, learners should be guided into the acquisition of model word-strings appearing in the reading passages.

It was decided that the learners would be instructed at the very outset that: (1) they should tackle each reading passage section by section (The passages would be divided into sections A, B, C, etc., each section dealing with one particular sub-theme, which may comprise just one paragraph in certain cases, or two or more in certain other cases. The paragraphs would be numbered 1, 2, 3, etc.); (2) they should read and comprehend the section thoroughly (with the help of the glossary, wherever necessary. The glossary, by the way, is only meant to help the learners understand the passages properly. Therefore, for each word, only the meaning it has in the passage is given; there is no elaborate treatment of any word such as providing its different forms or meanings or uses. A glossary, in its simplest form, has been worked out for passage 1 alone - just to give a sample. Similar glossaries are expected to accompany the other passages as well.); (3) then they should look at the questions and blank-
filling tasks supplied for that section and find the answers and fillers correctly from the section. (There will be as many blank spaces as the number of words in the string to be filled in; this arrangement will provide additional help to the learners to get the tasks done correctly. Further, the number of the paragraph in which the answer for the question or the fillers for the blanks occur will also be indicated within brackets. The idea is that learners must find the right answers/fillers from the paragraphs indicated, learn them up thoroughly, and then reproduce them perfectly from memory.); (4) they are encouraged to read the section as many times as they would like to, that is, till they feel confident that they know the answers and fillers fully well; (5) they should then close the book and write these out from memory, without referring back to the section till they finish writing; (6) they should then check what they have written, by referring back to the book; (7) they should do the task again (if they have committed mistakes) and get it fully right from memory.

With the above instructions the learners are expected to work through the passages, section by section. In each section, at the end of one or two blank-filling tasks (which are expected to have been successfully done by the learners), when the very same sentences on which the blank-filling was done can be put together to form a modest paragraph on one of the identified sub-
themes (step 3 above), learners are instructed to write out the paragraph from memory. On every sixth passage, they are further instructed, on each sub-theme, to recall and write out from memory the paragraph(s) they wrote on the same sub-theme(s) every five passages earlier.

Precautions are taken to safeguard the learners from the drudgery of writing out repeat paragraphs and to make it a meaningful activity for them. They are asked to make a comparative study of the points mentioned under the same sub-theme in different paragraphs. Further, there is no insistence on their writing out the repeat paragraph(s). After they make the comparative study of the points, it is just suggested to them that perhaps they would like to write out the different paragraphs from memory. The instructions to the learners are carefully planned in order to take the learners through the course with interest, enthusiasm and involvement. This way, spaced and meaningful repetitions of the same set(s) of sentences are provided for. By the end of the reading course, the learners would thus have written and re-written (up to half a dozen times, hopefully, in some cases) from memory, 50-75 paragraphs, on 2-3 sub-themes from each of the 25 passages.

They are not asked to write their own paragraphs at a time when they are not equipped for such an exercise. At the same
time, they are made to write out well-structured paragraphs from the textbook with as much mental involvement as though they are writing their own paragraphs; they are led into making so many well-formed English sentences their own, with which they have already begun to build a repertoire -- the repertoire from which their own meaningful use of English should result eventually.

The last five passages will each be the last of a series of five passages on each of the five broad themes. Wherever possible, on each sub-theme in each of these five passages, when the fresh paragraph and all the repeat paragraphs have been written, learners are further instructed to write, for the first time, a paragraph of their own, on a topic provided, which is very close to the topic dealt with in the sub-theme concerned. Thus, by the end of the reading course, the learners would have written 10-15 paragraphs of their own, on topics related to the 2-3 sub-themes running across the passages. After having written 50-75 recall-paragraphs, it is expected that the learners will have the internalized equipment which would enable them to write out their own paragraphs on similar topics. The course is thus expected to help learners to first build up an internalized repertoire, consisting of a limited corpus of English (acquired free of errors), and then to extrapolate from there to do a limited range of free writing. This achievement, modest though it is, should certainly prove to be a worthwhile
accomplishment targeted by an ESL reading course for the Intermediate level.

The reading course under discussion here was thus designed, first to help comprehension, and then to utilize the comprehended passages for the learners' acquisition of a limited corpus of standard academic English. Teachers would be instructed to ensure the learners' right comprehension of the reading passages, and then their faithful working out of the tasks -- and perhaps nothing more. It is hoped that the objectives in view should find realization through a reading course of the above description.

No one is born with the use of a language; nor does one create a language for one's use in a given speech community. On the contrary, one acquires all of one's language in use, from the community that uses it. Every language learner must purposefully imitate other people's ways of using the language, in order to gain acceptance as a member of the community of its users. These are indisputable axioms which are often ignored by ESL theoreticians who are anxious to propose theories which have never been proposed by anyone before. They more often than not end up by proposing theories which are ridiculously new and almost outlandish. After all, thousands of human generations have learnt the meaningful use of their respective languages, without the help of any theories; all of them have taken the
beaten track, gone the same way, and found it working. Could there be any exotic theories about something as basically human as the acquisition of the meaningful use of a language? It could only be a process of purposeful copying of other people's use of the language in question.

The following excerpt from Palmer (The Principles of Language-Study) should serve as an appropriate summing up of our discussion in this chapter.

...... in the early stages a certain amount of deliberate and conscious memorizing must be done; we shall insist on the daily repetition of a certain number of useful compounds, but sooner or later we shall come to a stage in which memory work must be carried out on a far larger scale and in a far more spontaneous manner. We must train ourselves to become spontaneous memorizers, and this can only be done in one way: we must acquire the capacity for retaining a chance phrase or compound which has fallen upon our ears in the course of a conversation or speech. It is in this way that we have acquired those thousands of phrases and combinations which make up the bulk of our daily speech in our own language. We have acquired the capacity of noting and retaining any new combinations of English words which we may chance to hear; we do this unconsciously, and are not aware of doing so; we rarely or never invent new types of compounds, but simply reproduce at appropriate moments those types of compounds which we have happened to hear used by those speaking in our presence. This is one of the habits we acquired in our infancy; this is one of the habits we must revive now and use for the foreign language we are studying. So long as we have not acquired this habit our progress will be slow -- too slow for the purpose we have in view......

This is further supported by proponents of realistic theories from more recent times such as Wilga Rivers and D.D. Steinberg. Wilga Rivers (Speaking in Many Tongues) complains:

Too often in the past, foreign language teaching concentrated on an understanding of the language.
system as a whole without providing sufficient practice in rapid production of the lower-level elements. This led to hesitancy in language use.

Danny D. Steinberg (Psycholinguistics) has the following to say in this regard:

Familiar phrases like the little boy or bread and butter and familiar sentences like Mary had a little lamb or Where is it? undoubtedly are stored in memory in their entirety as is a lexical item like dog or eclipse. There is no reason to suppose that such sentences need to be created in the way that novel sentences must be. Rather, given that one wishes to express the meaning of one of the stock items, no grammar rules need be applied... While...habits or conditioning alone cannot account for novel sentence use, it does not follow that habits or conditioning must play no important role in language learning and performance. The fact that speakers are able to produce and understand sentences at the fantastic rate that they do could never be explained, if we supposed that every sentence had to be connected through the application of all related rules... Aside from providing a direct meaning-sound association for rapid processing of production and understanding, familiar phrases and sentences may provide a basis for the processing of novel phrases and sentences which are similar to them. If we have stored a familiar phrase and sentence, e.g., the little boy and the dog ran, we should not need to reprocess everything when structurally similar phrases and sentences that we have never dealt with before such as the little girl and the cat ran are to be produced or understood. It is likely that through simple substitution (girl for boy and cat for dog) we have entire ready-made semantic or phonetic sequences at our disposal. Undoubtedly, the amount of time that it takes to search through a myriad of stored data is less than that which is needed to produce or understand the sentence through the regular rule-use channel. Direct access to phrases and sentences should be nearly as rapid as it is for individual words.
One last point needs to be mentioned about a language learners' building of a repertoire consisting of a large number of actual sentences/phrases/strings in the language concerned, for ready recall and use. This process can be effectively carried out only within a conducive linguistic environment, and not in a linguistic vacuum. The learner must be given ample opportunities for encountering the language in listening and reading activities -- not necessarily graded material for hundred per cent comprehension, but material for a fair degree of comprehension and a much greater degree of enjoyment, such as stories, playlets, poems, rhymes, etc., which will develop in him a 'feel' for the language. A 'feel' for the language and the way it functions is an essential backdrop against which the almost completely error-free acquisition of a limited general-service corpus can be effectively planned and accomplished. The reading course discussed in this chapter must be accompanied by supportive material of the kind mentioned above in the curriculum being planned for the level under consideration here.

The next chapter will present a prototype of the model reading course described above. Though all the 25 reading passages are given in full, it is still only a prototype, because: (1) there is only a 'sample' glossary provided at the end of passage 1 -- just to show a sample and to say that similar glossaries should be appended to all the passages; (2)
instructions to the learners (which have been described clearly above) are not completely written out in the form in which they should go to the learners; only indications such as 'question-answering', 'blank-filling' and 'paragraph-writing' (on the sub-theme(s) mentioned) are provided. Therefore, what is presented in the next chapter is not actually the reading course as such, but a complete working out of the scheme for preparing the model reading course envisaged by this study; it may be called a prototype of the course envisaged.

Further, there is no claim being made that the tasks that are indicated/worked out are either complete sets of those tasks possible on the given passages or that there are no other task-types possible on those passage. There could be any number of further items under the task-types indicated and any number of task-types other than the ones indicated, on the given passages. However, what merits special mention is the fact that what has been worked out above is a scheme for ensuring the learners' meaningful acquisition of a sufficiently large number of well-formed, basic word-combinations/strings which have a high utility value for them -- a process of acquisition designed through the use of the simplest of means. Course books currently available abound in all kinds of intricately designed and complex tasks for the learners. They may stimulate some intellectual activity among the learners. But, whether they will lead to any
language acquisition is anybody's guess: they may not, by any stretch of one's imagination.

As has already been pointed out, language acquisition is basic to human development, and it may not require any exotic stimuli for its unfolding or occurrence; in all probability, it should unfold spontaneously through the use of the simplest of means such as imitation, copying, memorization, etc. This is the conviction underlying the 'scheme' that has been developed in this study. What has been worked out is just a few samples of the tasks which should certainly be part of a reading programme, in addition to (and not instead of) any number of other possible task types; whether there are other task-types or not, these should necessarily be there. This is the point being made emphatically.

More importantly, what the 'scheme' demonstrates is the set of principles underlying the choice and the compilation of the reading passages in the course, which lends themselves to the planning of the repetitive tasks which are of crucial importance to the process of language acquisition. The prototype presented exemplifies in the first place, the principles of passage selection and compilation for preparing a model reading course, geared to the learners' acquiring (and also forming a habit of acquiring) well-formed, useful strings in the language.