ABSTRACT

This study was triggered by certain questions regarding ESL teaching practices at the Intermediate level which it became increasingly difficult to ignore. The researcher's experience of teaching at that level had given him ample opportunities for handling teaching materials prescribed for the level. He helped his students to comprehend the prescribed reading passages and to work through the exercises appended to them, the way his predecessors did, and the way he and his contemporaries in the profession, to the best of his understanding, were expected to do. At the end of two whole years of ESL teaching at the Intermediate level, it appeared that successive generations of students exited almost with the same low degree of proficiency in the use of English as they had entered the course with.

A thorough examination of the course would provide no clear answer to the question as to what it was trying to teach; in other words, the objectives of the programme could not be arrived at through an examination of the course materials prescribed. Rightly speaking, as we all agree, course materials in use should clearly reflect the objectives they are trying to achieve, without having to be stated explicitly. Teachers, if asked, would have the ready, but vague, answer that the objective was to enable learners to use English satisfactorily. If they were to be asked a second question as to whether they believed that the course, and the way it was being taught, catered to the realization of this objective, most of them would be at a loss for an answer.
The one question that became most difficult to ignore was what the course (and the way it was being taught) was trying to achieve, or actually achieving. Nothing in the course gave evidence of a clear answer to this question existing in the minds of the course-makers and guiding them in making the course. Nor did the teachers seem to be clear about what exactly had to be achieved, how exactly it had to be achieved, and whether it was being achieved at all. This was the background against which the present researcher strongly felt that it was time to face these questions squarely, and that he should do so by chalking out a research programme for himself. His obvious starting point was a critical examination of existing ESL teaching practices and the course materials currently in use, in order to figure out what they professed to achieve, and what, in reality, they were capable of achieving.

Chapter-I is introductory; it describes the present ESL scene as the background of the study. It points out that a large majority of students, in spite of undergoing schooling in the medium of English, fail to reach the criterion level of proficiency in English by the Higher Secondary stage, and states that something is certainly going wrong somewhere, and that the situation calls for a thorough investigation.

Chapter-II takes a closer look at the current ESL scene, and attempts a more realistic re-statement of the objectives of ESL
teaching at the Intermediate level in India. It argues that the Indian ESL learner at the Intermediate level needs the standard academic variety of English most, in order to be able to pursue his University education in the medium of English as, unlike in many other countries, most Indian students proceed almost automatically from Intermediate to Tertiary level education for which, almost everywhere, the medium is English; it also argues that reading is the most feasible means by which an Indian ESL learner at the Intermediate level can attain the required degree of proficiency in the use of the standard academic variety of English. Chapter-II comes to a close by pointing out the need to prepare a reading course for use at the Intermediate level, specially designed to enable the ESL learners to acquire the kind of English that they need most to possess. Existing reading programmes, obviously, do not have any clear vision as far as objectives are concerned, and no obvious efforts are being made to help ESL learners to progress in any clear direction. The primary strength of this study, it may be claimed, is its clear vision of a realistic, down-to-earth objective or set of objectives, and an honest effort to translate this/these into a reading programme for the Intermediate level. It may also be claimed that another strength that this dissertation has is its way of going straight to the point it wishes to make, without giving any unnecessary details; there is no beating about the bush; there is no padding. These days it is not often that one
finds a dissertation, especially in many of the humanities (The sciences seem to be different in this respect.) that, in the first place, has something to say that attracts attention, and secondly, says it unambiguously, precisely and effectively; often, whatever points there are, get lost inside irrelevant verbiage and the pseudo-scientific statistical presentation of voluminous data.

Having visualized the objective(s) clearly, the study perceives its next step as seeking the theoretical bases for planning an ESL reading programme (for the Intermediate level) with a view to achieving the objective(s) visualized. After going through a careful examination of theories of language and language acquisition/learning, and a process of sifting, the study identifies the Whorfian hypothesis and the Vygotskyan theory as the major sources for the theoretical support necessary for developing the reading programme envisaged. Chapter-III deals with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its implications for the SL classroom; it argues a case for the use of native speaker discourse (bearing the stamp of the native speaker culture upon it) in the SL classroom. Chapter-IV deals with the Vygotskyan perspective of the development of higher psychological functions --how these are historically developed and culturally transmitted --(language development being one of them), and its pedagogical implications, and argues a case for planning activities in the SL
classroom geared to the promotion of the learners' meaningful interaction with the reading passages provided, their purposeful involvement in the learning process, and their imitation and acquisition of the models of language use presented to them.

Chapter-V traces the course of language development in the community and in the individual. Chapter-VI discusses the process of second language development in the classroom, and points out the need to deliberately provide for the learners' repeated meaningful contact with specific word-strings in the target language which are well-formed, which have a high utility value for the learners, and which range within a targeted limited corpus of the language. What the study advocates is the almost completely error-free acquisition of a limited target corpus of the language to serve as the internalized repertoire or the core from which the learner should eventually and spontaneously (that is, when the time matures or he feels ready) take to the free use of the language through extrapolation.

Chapter-VII tries to show how ESL teaching theory, as put forward in Chapters-III, IV, V and VI, can be translated into actual classroom practices, i.e., preparation of teaching materials and methodology for the learners' handling of the prescribed teaching materials. It lays down the complete set of principles to guide passage selection and compilation for developing a reading course for use at the Intermediate level,
and to guide the planning of tasks for the learners, based on the
reading passages in the course. A complete 'scheme' for the
preparation of a model reading course for use at the Intermediate
level is worked out in this chapter.

Chapter-VIII presents a 'prototype' of the proposed model
reading course, comprising 25 reading passages arranged in a
particular order, a sample glossary appended to passage No.1, and
tasks of a specific kind worked out on all the reading passages
-- all specifically geared to the learners' (error-free)
acquisition of a target corpus of standard academic English, in
realization of the clearly visualized objective. Further, the
course is also intended to help learners in forming a habit of
taking possession of well-structured strings of words appearing
in their subject textbooks or wherever, or in developing a
particular strategy of reading which would enable them to acquire
the use of word-strings.

Chapter-IX gathers all the 'loose ends' for a conclusion,
and states that the study started off with a feeling of
dissatisfaction about the prolific theorizing in the field of ESL
teaching, and the tendency to propose 'new' theories which owed
their 'newness' to their superficiality, their irrelevance for
the classroom, and their distance from the 'fundamentals' of
language learning/teaching theory; it claims to have made a
modest effort to return to the 'fundamentals' once again. The
study draws to a close by making the recommendation that a full-fledged reading course (complete in all respects) should be produced for use at the Intermediate level, on the lines proposed in Chapter VII and exemplified by the prototype presented in Chapter-VIII, and that it should be tried out in a longitudinal programme on a group of actual Intermediate level learners, in order to prove the validity of the claims made by the study.