CHAPTER-I

Introduction

The study presented in this dissertation attempts a re-definition of the objectives of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at the Higher Secondary or Intermediate level of the formal system of education in India. The main purpose of the study is to prepare a reading course for use at the Intermediate level which will clearly reflect the objectives stated. The theoretical underpinnings of such a reading programme are briefly discussed in the earlier part of the dissertation. This discussion leads on to the working out of a complete scheme for the preparation of the reading course envisaged, followed by the presentation of a prototype of the course. This is an attempt at translating the theory discussed, into actual classroom practice, and hence is considered more important than the theory itself. Therefore, in addition to the scheme worked out, the prototypical course itself forms part of the body of the dissertation, and in fact is considered to be the most important part of the dissertation and the main contribution made by the study. It is expected that course-makers will derive the necessary guidance from these. Such sources for their guidance are not known to exist anywhere at present; at least their existence is not evident in the reading courses that are prepared and prescribed at present. It is hoped that the model presented in this study will serve to fill the wide gap now existing between theory and practice in ESL teaching in India. This chapter
proposes to make certain introductory remarks about the study; it attempts to describe the background of the study, and tries to argue a case for it.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked, "One hundred and fifty years of intimate contact has made English an integral part of our education system and this cannot be changed without injury to the cause of education in India." (qtd. in Sachdeva, A New Approach) The contradiction that arises out of this is that, while there is no question of doing away with English in our system of education, we are left with far from adequate resources necessary for doing a reasonably good job with our ESL teaching, especially at the Higher Secondary level, where the foundations have to be laid soundly for employing English as a medium for higher learning.

Since the time of India's Independence there has been a rapid widening of the reach of English in the country, but there has also been a simultaneous steady decline in the standards of proficiency in the use of English. Today the situation is very bad: "......a situation in which English has broken down completely as a medium of higher learning. Even pupils who have matriculated with first class marks, passing out of a high school which has a regional language as its medium, fail generally to understand either their PUC or Higher Secondary texts or the lectures delivered in English in the PUC classes. As for
expression, it is almost non-existent in the large majority of cases...... There are almost as many kinds of written English as there are candidates taking an examination.' (Government of India, Report 1967)

This being the case it is imperative that thorough investigations be conducted in order to analyse the problem and to arrive at a workable solution to it. The most obvious solution would be to import technology/methodology from the West where they have been fairly successful in second language teaching/learning. However, for us this imported know-how would, instead of solving our problems, only contribute to compound them. This is so because "The teaching of English in India today is not the same thing as the teaching of this language in India twenty years ago, or its present-day teaching in France or Germany. Our needs are different, so too are our limitations and, in some ways advantages. Naturally, therefore, the methods that work in the continent of Europe or among non-native speakers in the United States may not work in our conditions." (Government of India, Report 1971)

This means that we have to search for indigenous solutions to our problems, keeping in mind our resources and our limitations. A good beginning may be made by looking at the bilingual situation existing in India. In spite of the absence of a sizable native English speaking community, English has an all
pervading influence here. It has taken the place of a second
language and not that of a foreign language. We need English for
a variety of purposes -- as the lingua franca within India; as
our window on the outside world in general and the world of
science and technology in particular; as the medium of higher
education, and so on. Things have come to such a pass that
English has become for us the language of all opportunities, and
we cannot do without it at any cost. The bilingualism that has
resulted out of this is a very strange and interesting kind of
phenomenon.

As has already been mentioned, there has been a rapid
widening of the reach of English in the country since
Independence, resulting in the mushrooming of English medium
schools all over the country; yet there has also been a
simultaneous decline in the standards of proficiency in the use
of English. This leads one to question the efficacy of total
English medium instruction as a means to acquire proficiency in
the use of English. The problems with total English medium
instruction are that firstly, we do not have the necessary
resources -- material or human -- to implement total English
medium education properly. Secondly, it has as its objective,
fluency in speaking and writing English with emphasis on the
former, the assumption being that a fluent speaker is
automatically a fluent writer, listener and reader. That this is
a fallacy has been proved by studies conducted by Gupta. Learners from the English medium stream were found to perform just as badly as learners from the vernacular medium stream, in spite of all the exposure to English they had had.

Gupta's was a major study conducted in the country wherein she measured the English language proficiency of a sample of 300 students of the school-leaving level (Class X) taken from five English medium schools in a city in Uttar Pradesh, three English medium schools in a town in Rajasthan and one English medium school in a city in West Bengal, which proved that 54% of the students failed to reach the criterion level of proficiency in English. Clearly, there is something going wrong somewhere, and we need to put our finger on that.

This is the background against which an attempt is being made in the present study for a re-definition of the objectives of ESL teaching at the Intermediate level in India. Chapter-II will take a close look at the current ESL scene, the practices followed and the outcomes achieved, and then go on to a critical examination of the objectives currently envisaged, with a view to restating them in a more realistic manner.