CHAPTER-II

Objectives of ESL Teaching at the Intermediate or Higher Secondary Level in India

The purpose of this chapter is to attempt a more realistic restatement of the objectives of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at the Higher Secondary level of the formal system of education in India after a critical re-examination of existing ESL teaching practices and the objectives they profess to achieve. Objectives visualized and practices followed traditionally, most of which still continue, have long been recognized as unsatisfactory, inadequate, unrealistic and badly in need of replacement.

The whole problem seems to stem from a lack of understanding as to what kind of English our ESL learners need to acquire. In this context the question to be faced squarely is: What do our ESL learners need to learn to do with English? Statistical investigations conducted on the different kinds of uses of English in India, and the number of people using English in each of those ways, reveal that the most important use of English in India is as a medium for higher learning. (Choudhary, Survey of English) In other words, students use English most, and they use it primarily for their academic purposes. If academic purposes are what they use English mostly for, then certainly the academic variety is what they need most to possess.

The assumption is that the school leaver has acquired enough English to cope with the demands of higher education in the
medium of English. He will be required to listen to lectures delivered in English, take notes, read and comprehend subject matter from books, make notes, write assignments and examinations - all this in the medium of English. The University student will also have to do considerable supplementary reading in English on his own, in order to have an adequate mastery of his subject(s) of study and specialization, perusing not merely books written in English, but also journals and other current periodicals. Obviously, there is a heavy demand placed on his ability to function in English, especially through reading and writing, and to a lesser extent through listening also. In addition to all this, India being a multilingual country, English is required to play the role of a lingua franca in the context of inter-state movement and communication. A student may need to go to another state for his collegiate education; he may need to travel to other parts of the country for educational or occupational purposes, or to take an examination or an interview on competitive bases, in the medium of English.

It is quite clear from all this that the capabilities a college entrant is expected to possess in English are supposed to serve his academic needs. In other words, students at the higher education level are expected to possess as much of the standard academic variety of English as possible. A student proficient in standard academic English will not find it very difficult to acquire proficiency in the register of science or in
any specialized register for that matter. The particular register of English which may be required in a specialist field of study or on a job will be acquired during the course of study or on the job without much problem by a student who has acquired the standard academic variety of the language properly during his schooling. Therefore, we must have our priorities fixed rightly. At the Higher Secondary level, our primary aim must be to give the student a general competence in the language which will help him fulfil his academic needs. An objective like making all our school goers fluent speakers of acceptable English would be unrealistic and also unattainable. It would be far more realistic and advisable to set up a clearly articulated, modest and limited objective, like giving a reasonable majority of them academic proficiency in the use of English, as manifested in their reading and writing abilities for academic purposes.

A large majority of educated Indians would like to have their children speaking English very fluently even at the expense of proficiency in their native language. This perhaps is the main reason for English medium education to thrive in this country and become 'big business' involving 'big money'. But, is it necessary for us to sacrifice proficiency in the use of the native languages for acquiring proficiency in the use of English? Our native languages, with their rich literatures and traditions, are precious national possessions, and it would be an enormous national loss if they were to become impoverished and
die out through disuse. The need of the hour is adequate proficiency in English as well as in the native language. Proficiency in one at the expense of the other will be detrimental to the larger interests of our learners.

It should be possible to acquire equal proficiency in both languages -- English and the native language -- by planning a bilingual system of education. There was a time when bilingualism was considered to be detrimental to proper cognitive development. However, recent research has dismissed that theory as unfounded. In fact, research points out that it is when one develops an insight into the structuring of another language that the structuring of one's own language becomes clearer. Today bilingualism is no longer seen as a deterrent to cognitive development, but instead, is considered to be a desirable and welcome phenomenon which would enhance the thinking and conceptualizing faculties of one's mind. This being the case, there is no reason why our children should be made to forget their native languages in order to learn English. That, in effect, would be denying them the advantages of bilingualism. We need both English and the native language. We cannot do without either. Therefore, what is really desirable is to make our children educated users of English as well as of the native language concerned, at the same time.

Studies conducted in different parts of the world have proved that it is best for children to start their schooling in
the medium of their mother tongue. The use of the native language for classroom instruction allows the education of the child to continue uninterruptedly from home to school, permitting immediate progress in concept building rather than postponing development till a new language has been acquired. Therefore, in a country like India, where the resources necessary for providing sound native language medium education are easily available, it would be advisable for children to start schooling in a monolingual system where the native language is the sole medium of instruction. This could continue till the meaning-organizations of their native languages have been established firmly in their minds. At a later stage, say, class IV or V, when they are cognitively ready for the reception of the elements of an alternative code, namely English, it may be introduced into the curriculum as a subject of study. For about three years it could remain as a subject of study and the children could learn about its elements, their properties and the rules that govern their use. As a result, at the point of entry into high school stage, it could be expected of the children to have some readiness to start handling English as a medium of expression. It should not be forgotten that up to this stage it was a monolingual system, the native language being the sole medium of instruction and English only a subject of study.

One never acquires the use of a language if one's acquaintance with it is only as a subject of study; one must use
it in order to learn to use it. Therefore, in keeping with our objective of equal proficiency in both native language and English, at the high school stage, apart from being a subject of study, English could also become the medium of instruction for any two or three content subjects on the curriculum. These subjects should be taught and tested in English only, right up to the tertiary level.

What is envisaged is a bi-medial strategy of education where English and the mother tongue are partial media of instruction. This strategy, it is hoped, will build up in the learners, cognitive, academic proficiency in the use of both languages at the same time.

The biggest limitation with regard to English teaching that we face in India is the use of textbooks written in substandard English taught by teachers who know very little English. The textbooks -- the chief teaching resource in our context -- are all compiled with scant regard for the principles of selection, gradation, presentation and practice. In one word, they are 'hostile' to the process of learning. Incompetent and indifferent teachers make matters worse. The foundational years for the teaching of English in schools are in the hands of teachers who neither know enough English nor are familiar with the latest developments in language pedagogy. They have little idea of correct usage and none at all of correct pronunciation; their vocabulary is limited as is their reading.
This problem, though impossible to do away with, may be surmounted if we make an attempt to bypass the teachers and approach the students directly. It would be impossible to train thousands of school teachers to be good speakers of English. However, it should be possible to train a few dozen textbook writers to write textbooks, say, in two content subjects such as geography and history -- textbooks that are programmed to teach the academic use of English in addition to the content of geography and history.

While using a language as a medium of expression, isolated words and their meanings and grammar rules are of very little value; what one needs is the facility with which one can string words together in order to say what one wants to say. Our ESL learners may know the necessary word meanings and grammar rules in English; though such knowledge is essential, it is next to impossible for anyone to make a conscious application of such knowledge in order to make up one's communicational strings. One must build up close associations with these strings as strings, and not as sets of words in isolation. In other words, our learners need meaningful and close acquaintance with English word-strings. This kind of acquaintance will come about only when they have relevant content to handle in the medium of English and have good models of such use of English to interact with. Unfortunately in our context, such models are available neither in the spoken nor in the written form. However, with a little
ingenuity, it should be possible for us to make available models in the written form. Through specially programmed lessons in geography, history and such other content subjects, it should be possible for us to give our learners the most useful kinds of strings of words which they recognize as model expressions or effective ways of saying what they want to say in English. It is a matter of training learners to take possession of a large number of highly re-usable strings of words with which they build up a repertoire of the most essential core of standard academic English.

Taking possession of strings of words, as visualized here, is a normal and automatic achievement for the first language learner because of the richness of his exposure to the language in question. Every second of his life he is surrounded by the language in all its richness and all its variety. For a second language learner it is a different story altogether. His exposure to the second language is grossly inadequate. Whatever little he receives in any form is, more often than not, incorrect and leading to the acquisition of faulty and dysfunctional English, something which is of no use to him for any purpose.

In order to offset this handicap, a strategy should be drawn up whereby learners get adequate input which is correct and controlled in nature, with a deliberate attempt to shift the focus to the language and enough opportunities for meaningful
practice built in. Reading assumes a lot of importance in this context. In a vast country like India where producing a specialist cadre of competent English teachers and/or providing for interaction in the second language as rich as in the first language is impossible, reading is the only mode of input which could be fairly effectively used, bypassing the teacher and the environment, in providing for the necessary contact with the kind of English we expect our learners to acquire.

A word of clarification regarding reading is in order here. Reading, by definition, is the activity of perusing a text for comprehending the ideas contained therein. Normally, everyone reads for gathering information, and the language which conveys the information is taken for granted. This is why people who are efficient readers, in the sense that they read with adequate speed and comprehension, are not necessarily efficient speakers and writers. Those who attract attention as effective speakers and writers are the ones who, while reading and listening, pay attention also to effective use of language for the expression of the information they are trying to gather. This is a strategy used by the conscious learner of a language. Even in the use of one's own native language one becomes more powerful by employing this strategy. In the case of a second language learner this is the strategy for the very acquisition of the language. In a situation where the primary source of language input for learning a second language has to be the activity of reading, the learner
must necessarily be trained to use this particular strategy of reading, by which he gathers modes of expression along with the information being expressed. Without deliberate training, an ordinary reader does not read this way, even when he has to learn the use of a second language mainly through the activity of reading. It is important that reading for the acquisition of a second language be viewed as an activity that is different from ordinary reading, and a scheme be devised for training learners for such reading in the second language.

The meaning of reading, as it is used in this study, therefore, is slightly different from the sense in which it is normally used. The purpose of reading, in the scheme of things of this study, is not just gathering information, but gathering also strings of words, viz., taking cognizance and possession of highly re-usable stretches of language. Therefore the need of the hour is to develop a reading strategy with a shift in focus where the learners are trained to concentrate on the medium in addition to the idea presented in it. The message should be used as a means to acquire the medium.

This chapter thus draws to its close by arguing a case for developing a particular strategy of reading as the truly feasible means for giving the Indian ESL learner at the Intermediate level the kind of English that he most urgently needs to possess. He would have come to the Intermediate level after having done his
schooling either in the medium of the regional Indian language or in the medium of English. Either way he may not have used any ESL teaching materials which are specially programmed for the purpose or got trained to use the kind of reading strategy for effective ESL learning. In this study we are concerned about such learners at the Intermediate level, whose proficiency in the use of English is still far from satisfactory, and who need to be trained to use the particular reading strategy for effective ESL learning. The purpose of this study is to develop a reading course for such learners at the Intermediate level, in order to give them the kind of English they need, and also to train them in using the particular reading strategy.