CHAPTER-III

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: Its Possible Implications for Second Language Pedagogy

As the title suggests, this chapter falls into two sections. The first section deals with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the second one with its implications for second language pedagogy.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is directly connected with ethnolinguistic research of the American school of Anthropology. The fundamental ideas of that hypothesis were developed in the 1920s and the 1930s, but became popular in the late 1940s. It stimulated further research and publications in the next decade, i.e., the 50s. Then for two decades, the 60s and the 70s, not much attention was paid to it. However, in the late 80s there was a renewed interest in it and people started perceiving new pedagogical implications in the hypothesis.

The two principal ideas inherent in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis are: "(i) Language is a social product. The language system in which we are educated, and in which we think, shapes the way we perceive the world around us. (ii) In view of the differences between the various language systems, people thinking in different languages perceive the world in different ways. These differences of languages are reflections of the different environments that produce them." (Schaff, Language and Cognition)

Sapir was one of a group of gifted students of Franz Boas who were reshaping anthropology in America. He explored the
implications of language study for the understanding of culture and personality and developed in preliminary form the proposal that each language shapes the conceptual world of its speakers. SapiE was Whorf's teacher and provided the general formulations which Whorf later tried to test, using his own studies of the Hopi Indian language.

Sapir's idea can be formulated as follows: "The language in which a given human community speaks and thinks organizes the experience and thereby shapes the world and the social reality of this community." (Schaff, Language and Cognition) In other words, language, socially conditioned as it is, influences the way a community grasps reality.

Whorf, "a chemist by vocation and a linguist by avocation", (Hickmann, Social and Functional Approaches) joined the developing tradition of the Boas-Sapir school. He had a strong interest in linguistics and a deep concern, born of his professional experience, with the problems of modern science. He is best known for his work on the relation between language and perception and thought. He was of the opinion that investigations of the logics of language will contribute to a better understanding of thinking habits.

Whorf injected into contemporary discussions on the study of man and his culture, a challenging set of hypotheses concerning
the relation of language to thinking and cognition. First, that all higher levels of thinking are dependent on language. Second, that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one understands one's environment, that is, the picture of the universe shifts from tongue to tongue.

Whorf believed that differences in thought content and their corresponding effects on thought processes and behaviour in general would be spectacularly revealed by comparison of different language structures. The premise of his comparative anthropological approach was that human languages are genuinely different in important ways and yet have equally developed and valid ways of representing reality. Within this framework his goal was to document the diversity of language forms and to analyse the significance of this diversity for cultural and psychological life.

Working under Sapir he did serious work on Native American Indian languages, particularly Hopi, and soon found in the intricate grammatical patterns of these exotic languages, ways of classifying and construing the world that were dramatically different from those of English and other European languages.

In his study of the Hopi language he noted that the grammar of Hopi bore a relation to Hopi culture, and the grammar of European tongues to the western European culture. This led him to conceive that Thought and Thinking in a community are not a
psychological enigma. Instead, it is cultural, and largely a matter of language, which is a cohesive aggregate of all cultural phenomena.

Whorf’s approach went beyond merely asserting that languages shape thought to present a detailed account of exactly how grammars mediate speakers’ perception of external reality. If languages encode sense relations in their grammatical structure, and these relations determine denotation, each language, in so far as it has a unique grammar, potentially embodies a different conceptual scheme. Whorf systematically investigates this insight through comparisons of how the grammatical structures of Hopi and English lead their speakers to different conceptions of what there is. He “argues that the structure of language plays a role in determining a world-view, and supports his argument by contrasting the world-view characteristic of speakers of Standard Average European with that of speakers of various American Indian languages.” (Schaff, Language and Cognition)

The Whorfian hypothesis in the weaker form, namely, linguistic relativism, suggests that the structure of a human being’s language influences the manner in which he understands reality and behaves with respect to it. Speakers of different languages habitually, perhaps unconsciously and automatically, tend to behave in different ways, because human mental processes are channelled by systems of grammar.
At this point, before beginning the second section of the chapter, it is necessary to attempt definitions of terms like conceptualization, reality, code of a language and system of representing reality.

1. **Conceptualization**

In informal terms it is the ability to capture reality in a manner in which it can be communicated to another human being who also possesses the same kind of innate capability.

According to Schema theory, conceptualization is the mental representation of reality, i.e., of reality as one perceives it.

2. **Reality**

Reality is the cosmos of existence. To experience it one has to be initiated into it. However, reality in the absolute sense is never what one experiences. What one experiences is only one's perception of reality.

3. **Code**

The code of a language comprises a set of arbitrarily determined symbols along with a set of rules for their use. 'Use' here should mean their right (syntactic) ordering.

4. **System**

The system may be defined as a semantic organization, in which the code serves the purpose of conveying meaning.
Language is a system of units which are used for capturing reality in myriad ways. Learning the meaningful use of a language, in the ultimate analysis, is learning to function freely within the framework of a particular system for capturing, categorizing and communicating reality and experience.

Different languages represent reality in different ways (Whorfian hypothesis). Each language has a unique system of meaning organization which is very different from the system of meaning organization of any other language, i.e., each language is a unique system for representing reality and experience.

This being the case, the natural corollary is that learning the competent use of another language different from one’s own, is learning to function within the framework of an altogether different system for representing reality and experience. In other words, to acquire the meaningful use of a second language and perform competently in it, one must step out of the system of one’s L1 and step into the system of the L2 in question, and function freely in it. This is what naturally emerges from the theory which is the central premise of this chapter, that each language is a unique system for perceiving, categorizing, organizing and capturing reality.

The competent use of a language is a matter of producing discourse characteristic of that language. Any particular unit in
a given code may be taken out and used inside discourse produced in any other code without affecting the meaning organization pertaining to that code. This would mean that no particular unit of a code in isolation retains its specificity. When it appears as part of discourse produced in that code it acquires its specific character given to it by virtue of its being a unit of that code.

It is the system as a whole that assigns to each unit its specific role as a member of the code. Therefore it is important to be acquainted with the system as a whole so that the various units of the code fall into proper places. It is wrong to imagine that it would be possible to produce discourse in a language by putting together units of the code learnt in isolation. If discourse that is characteristic of the target language has to be produced, the conceptualization underlying the production has to be done at the discourse level. That is, the whole discourse to be produced has to be mentally represented in terms of the system of the language. What the code subsequently does is the tangible symbolisation of what was mentally represented.

Thus it is evident that 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. However, once mastered, it should go down
into the subconscious stratum of the mind (and become automatic), from which position it can monitor the production of utterances which are syntactically acceptable.

In a teaching/learning system where the focus is on the code and its elements and not on the discourse, the underlying assumption is that one can produce discourse by putting together units of the code learnt in isolation. From the discussion so far it is quite obvious that it is a wrong assumption.

Therefore, what seems to be needed is an altogether different scheme of teaching in which our second language learners, apart from mastering the target code, are also given ample opportunities to get acquainted with pieces of discourse characteristic of the target language inside which the units of the code they have learnt in isolation fall into places and assume the roles naturally assigned to them. Such discoursal features cannot be taught in a classroom. What can and should be taught in the Second Language classroom are the units of the code. What we have to guard against is the assumption that the end of what we can teach will take the learner to the end of what he has to learn. With the knowledge of the code that he has been given in the classroom the learner must 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 discourse supplied to him. The teaching scheme envisaged by this study proposes to deliberately and systematically provide for the learners' further progress in target language learning on these lines.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness in many ESL situations, about the need to acquaint the ESL learners with the culture from which the English language has sprung. As a result, ESL curriculum makers have been planning for the explicit 'teaching' of various aspects of the English culture, little realizing the virtual impossibility of 'teaching' these. Many Indian curriculum planners seem to be of the view that Indian ESL learners should be taught ESL through pieces in English which are written by Indian writers in English and which are culturally truly Indian in character (presumably for learners' easier understanding) and then, in addition, should be given doses of English culture through other means and activities. This study is in total disagreement with this view of the matter. It has the conviction that it is wrong procedure to separate a language from its culture and to attempt the 'teaching' of the language and its culture separately; they are inseparable, the one from the other, and have to be dealt with together.

The teaching scheme envisaged by this study believes in using pieces that are written by native English writers and are
culturally genuinely English in character, for the reading programme in the ESL curriculum, with a view to teaching the code of English along with acquainting the learners with the aspects of the cultural milieu within which the code becomes operational meaningfully. Teaching is a process in which items are taken out and focussed on, one at a time. The point being argued here is that the items of the code for teaching can be taken out from the same piece of native English discourse which will later synthesize them back for the learner, not into a knowledge of the code of English in a collective sense, but into an experience of native English discourse. This is seen as a more reasonable way of handling matters, and a significant departure from practices currently followed in curriculum planning and materials production for ESL teaching in India.